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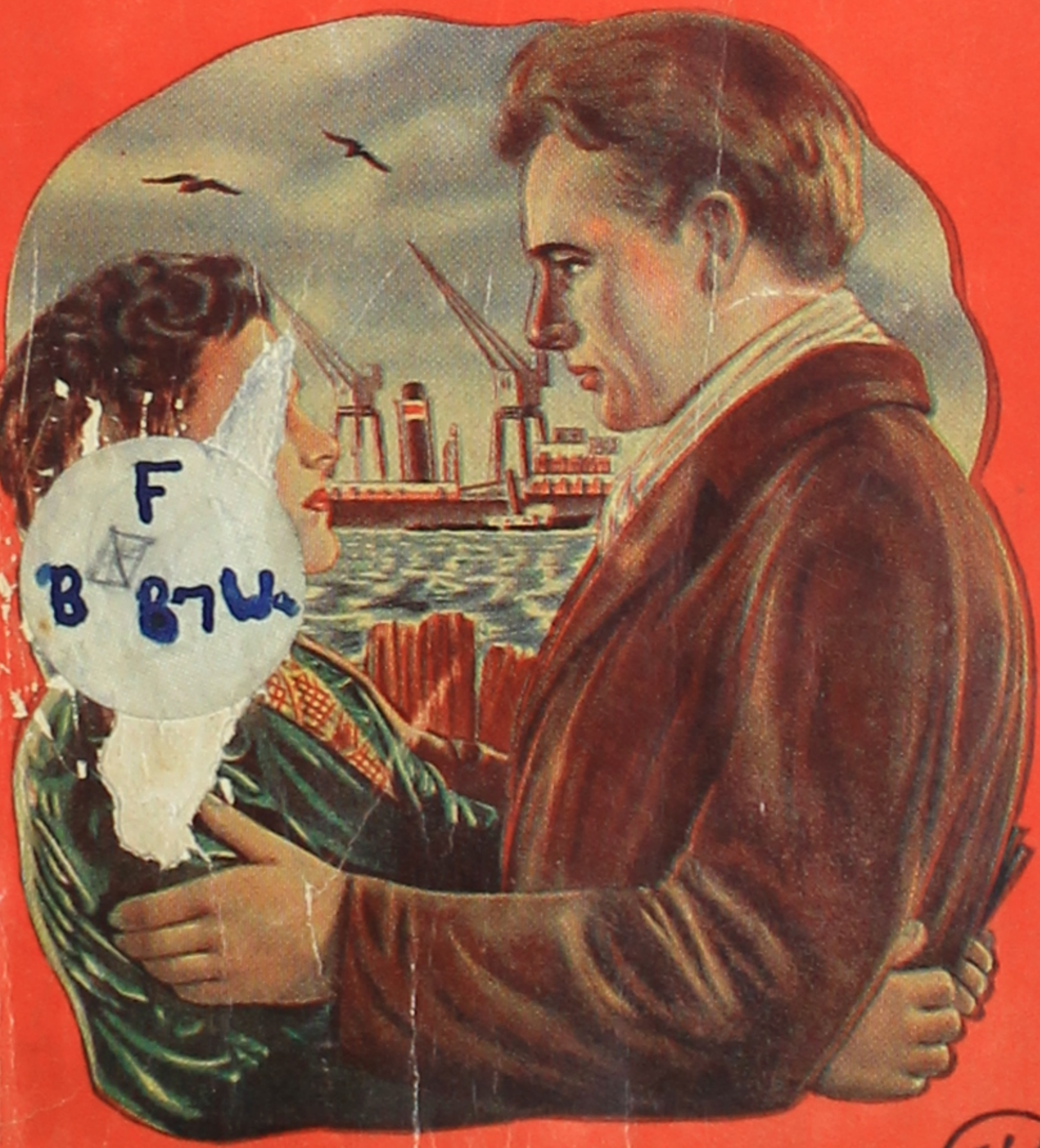
WATERFRONT

JOHN BROPHY



Scene from the British film based on this novel

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WATERFRONT

For a description of this book and some information about the author, see back of cover.

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WATERFRONT

JOHN BROPHY

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CHAPTER I

BREAKFAST

I

A WIND blew gustily against the window-panes, in sudden vehement assaults which rattled the frames like ill-tuned drums played by an exasperated apprentice drummer. From all the floors and windows of the house, and from under the roof above her, came melancholy creakings, and the curtains, both of them drawn, shivered and whispered to themselves. In the far corner of the room her sister turned suddenly in bed, and the rusty springs of the mattress twanged on a thin reverberating note. At the same moment Nora felt the wind, as it hurtled in eager breezes around the room, chill on her face. She shuddered, realising that day was upon her and once again the weather was cold.

Then the alarm clock rattled into noisy activity and, as always, her body jerked in the bed with nervous surprise. Connie had forgotten to move the clock to her bedside, and far away on the mantelpiece the toneless clattering shrieked to its climax and then slowed to a staid clang or two before it ceased. For two minutes Nora nestled deeper under the bedclothes, and her warmth and indolence of body became poignantly dear to her, and precious, as she realised that she must soon relinquish them. Then she reproved herself for laziness and moral weakness and, with a vehement shaking of her legs, threw aside sheets and blankets and swung her feet out on to the floor. Automatically she felt for her slippers beside the bed, worked her toes into them, and reached to the bed-rail

for the worn tweed coat which served her as a dressing-gown.

"For the love of mike," came from Connie's bed, "shut those blasted windows."

No longer could Nora feel alone.

"All right," she said, and shuffled across the linoleum to the window from which the wind blew icy on her still warm body. She closed the window, and flung the curtains rattling back.

The room in which she stood was high up in an old dilapidated house, which backed upon a sandy, waste space and overlooked the estuary. Once the wind was shut out of the room, she was happy again. This was her morning pleasure, to stand for a few moments at the window, and survey and consider the river prospect. The sun rose in front of her, rather to the left, and there all the sky was swept and cleared and suffused with pink. The low hills of the peninsula, two miles away, were cloudy with a purple haze, interspersed with twinkling gold lights, and the roughened waters of the estuary in between glittered gaily, their normal dirty grey transformed into a pearly radiance. To her right, and where she looked to see the Welsh hills and the rocky receding line of the Welsh coast, cloudy obscurity possessed the horizon; and westward to the Irish Sea the waters and the clouds mingled into a mass of shapeless and boundless purple gloom.

Turning again from this, her eyes were almost dazzled by the thin, silvern brilliance of the sunshine, piercing bright across so many miles of open and unclouded air, and burnishing the running tide and the long expanses of wet sand which began at the end of the street. From the narrower part of the estuary, where the roofs of the city stood hazy and silver in the morning light, and

round the projecting wall of the Gladstone Dock, came the morning tugs and trawlers, little low shapes, surging and lifting as they made their way against the tide, and each leaving behind it an untidy stream of blown smoke. From the light-vessel at the Bar, and from the grey stone lighthouse on the far shore, still came intermittent winking flashes, gold and crimson, but paled and subdued by the oncoming daylight.

Already on the foreshore, not a quarter of a mile away, the old mussel-gatherer, for whom she looked, was at work, his overcoated figure bending as he forced his steps against the wind, eyes downcast, stooping from time to time, a tiny, remote, preoccupied figure, intensely familiar to her as a decoration upon the shore, quite unknown as a human being.

Far out upon the western horizon, and seemingly perched upon the topmost rim of the sea (she could just discern it against the darkness) rose the tall mast of an incoming liner, lights still burning aloft, and a green navigation lamp showing. But nearer at hand, and steering a course between the conical buoys which marked the navigable channel, came a much smaller steamer, her blunt utilitarian lines and dingy paintwork revealed by the brilliance of the sunshine. The bleached blue funnel looked too slender for the sturdy bows, and near the stern three plates had been covered with a splash of red lead paint. The vivid scarlet stain tossed wearily up and down as the ship bore forward, urged by a following wind and a strong tide.

"They'll be glad to get home, I'll bet," thought Nora, who did not often allow herself to reflect upon the life of sailors.

For a few seconds longer she watched the little ship moving past her window, and then, with a start, turned away.

" Come on, kid," she said to her sister. " You'll be late again, and even if the Staff Manager does like your looks, he won't let you clock-in late every morning."

" Oh, shut up ! " cried Connie. " I can get dressed in half the time. Jeez! Isn't it cold ? "

" I wish you wouldn't say Jeez."

" And I wish to God you wouldn't talk so well-off. Anyhow, all the best people use slang nowadays."

" Not your slang," retorted Nora, who had by now rid herself of her coat, and was pulling a thick woollen vest around her waist, taking care that her nightdress, which she retained until the greater part of her dressing was completed, should not expose her body to her sister's unexcited stare.

" Come on, get out of it. You're bone lazy, that's what you are, Connie."

" Who said I wasn't? " replied her sister, with the good-humour of one who is still warm in bed watching another half-dressed and shivering. " But I'm not half so lazy as I'm going to be when I get married. No scrubbing floors or looking after dirty kids for me. Two maids and breakfast in bed every morning. That's what I'm looking for."

" You don't half fancy your chances."

" Course I do. You're jealous, that's what it is. Simply jealous. Tell you what, Nora, you've got no taste. Got no savvy either. What do you want to go and fall for a marine engineer for? Don't you know there's no future in shipping ? All unemployment it is."

" No need to tell me that. And you shut up about my Ben."

" All right, all right," said Connie. " Anyhow, it's time I got up. Don't you be long in the bath-

room now." And she, in turn, swung her legs out of bed, and shuddered as her bare feet touched the cold linoleum.

" When I'm rich, I'm going to have real Persian carpets. Lots of them, everywhere ; carpets your feet sink into. You know, like they have in hotels."

" I don't go to hotels."

" No, I was forgetting that. You don't get asked out, do you? "

" Chuck it."

By this time Nora was attired in a wool jumper and cloth skirt, beneath the hem of which showed artificial silk stockings, neatly darned on the inside of one calf. Her dark hair, short at the nape of her neck, but elsewhere long and thick, was tousled about her face, still laxed and misshapen with sleep. Her hands, roughened at the wrists and reddened with cold, were nevertheless manicured and the finger-nails varnished pink.

From below stairs a voice floated upwards : " Hurry up, girls. Your breakfast's nearly ready."

" Won't be long, Ma," Nora called back, lifting her voice suddenly. Then she hurried out onto the draughty landing.

2

The bathroom was even colder than her bedroom. Its green distempered walls were patched with stains, and blistered in many places, so that an older coat of whitewash showed beneath. The taps above the bath were rusty, and dribbled, and the dirty grey paint was marked with brown stains. Hot water was available only on Tuesday evenings, and Nora did not now even glance at the bath, except to snatch one from

a number of tattered face-cloths spread on the edge. A kettle of hot water stood beneath the chipped wash-basin and, seizing this, she filled the bowl, dipped a finger in, and then allowed a little cold water to run from under the taps. She washed her face, her ears and her neck with some carefulness, using no soap, and pressing the face-cloth again and again on her closed eyes. They had been aching lately, and her friends had advised her to obtain glasses. When she had scrubbed her hands, and used a worn brush on her finger-nails, she dried them with care on her towel. She had spent a long twelve months in squabbling before she secured a towel to herself, which the family was never allowed to touch.

Then she surveyed her face anxiously in the frameless mirror above the wash bowl, decided dismally that she looked older, and that her eyelids were red. At this moment Connie and her young brother arrived simultaneously and vehemently at the bathroom door, and Nora returned to her bedroom.

Entering again, she was overtaken by a familiar pang of regret and indignation. If only, she sighed, she had no brother, there would have been a bedroom for herself. She was hardly ever alone, and it was only on her twenty-seventh birthday that she had acquired the moral and economic victory of a bed for herself. Bad enough, she thought bitterly, to share this room with Connie. She could not bear to remember the long years when Connie had slept with her, although honesty compelled her to admit that she had felt warmer then through the winter nights. Even now, sometimes, when the bleak sea winds blew, or when a hard frost set in, Connie would exercise all her cajolery to obtain entrance to Nora's bed. Once she had attempted to come in, and there

had been a fight. The bruise remained, livid, on Nora's back for many a day after.

The bedroom was small, and at one end of it, Connie's end, as the younger sister, the ceiling sloped down at an acute angle, so that the head of the bed almost touched it. The bedsteads were of black enamelled iron, and the bedclothes on each of them, now thrown untidily aside, looked neither new or clean. The blankets were thin, shrunken, and utterly without fleeciness, and the cotton sheets showed holes and patches. In one wall a small metal gas-bracket was fixed, but both Nora and Connie despised the uncertain and flickering light it gave, so that beside each bedstead stood a small bamboo table, bearing a candlestick, and a good deal of molten candle fat in scattered patches. With the swift carelessness of established habit, Nora now picked up her coat-dressing-gown, and hung it on a hook, behind a length of old chenille curtain which served to convert one corner of the room into a wardrobe. Next proceeding to a rickety chest of drawers, she took up a scarlet but broken-toothed comb and a brush, and began vigorously to restore her tangled hair to order. Then, lifting a hand-mirror, she carried it over to the window, dabbed her face with a powder-puff and, after another journey to the chest of drawers, covered her mouth with lipstick. While she was tidying these appliances back into the chocolate-box which served as manicure case and toilet set, Connie entered.

"Oh, heck!" she exclaimed. "You do look an old hag with that crimson lipstick. How many times have I told you nobody uses that! Have some of my orange stuff?"

"Thank you for nothing," replied Nora.

"All right, then, but don't say I never told you."

Nora stood in the middle of the room, looking

around her, but without any definite intention. Connie bustled about, gathering clothes together, and flinging them into the curtained wardrobe. Nora paid no attention, until she heard : " Mind if I use your comb ? "

" You dare ! "

" Oh, hell ! I suppose I'll have to find my own instead. I must say, Nora, you're not being matey this morning. After all, we're all girls together. At least, I suppose you're still what they call a girl. No, honest, I'm sorry I said that. It's these blasted cold mornings. They turn me sour."

But Nora was once again paying no attention. Her unseeing eyes stared at the wall.

" What's the matter with you ? Still worrying your guts out about that boy friend of yours ? Oh, chuck it, do. He's not worth it. All right then, I'm sorry I said that. Anyhow, no boy's worth worrying about."

" Shut up, or else I'll throw something at you."

Then, for the first time that morning, Nora smiled.

" Have I been a pig ? I didn't mean to be."

" That's all right. Early morning, that's all. I say, will you clean my shoes for me ? I'm awful late as it is."

" O.K.," and Nora hurried downstairs.

3

Downstairs was the living-room, with a small pantry and kitchen attached. The McCabes shared the house with four other families, and, as the staircase was common to all, no one of them had the complete privacy of a flat. The McCabes, though not the least respectable of the tenants, were able only to pay the lowest rent. If the house had possessed a basement, as a suite of cellars was called in the neighbourhood, no doubt they would have lived there. But the cellars had long ago been flooded during one of the spring

tides, and a sanitary authority, not anxious or quick to condemn any rent-and-rate-producing property, had reluctantly decided that the cellars were best bricked up and forgotten. So the McCabes, mother, two daughters and schoolboy son, slept in the three attics under the roof trees, and spent their day, or such portion of it as was not occupied in wage-earning, in one room deducted from the floor rented by a family of Jewish cabinet-makers named Morris.

Mrs. McCabe liked the Morrises well enough, and was especially grateful that their religious orthodoxy was lax and intermittent. Only at feast times, and not always then, did Mrs. Morris consider herself bound to cook food in the prescribed kosher manner. When, as the kitchens of the four floors seemed to have no other outlet for their fumes than the well of the staircase, the McCabes' quarters were constantly filled with the odours of past and present cooking. The peculiar greasiness of kosher fat imposed upon these abiding smells could not be tolerated more than three times a year, or so Mrs. McCabe often assured her family. It was characteristic of her, however, that she never mentioned the subject to the Morrises. She would not have considered it right, or, in her own words, decent, to do so. Other people's religion and personal difficulties, such as disreputable husbands, refractory children and shortage of cash, were never to be mentioned except behind their backs. This was an inherited convention, which to some might appear hypocritical and deceptive, but was in fact a product of the desire to please. "One can't help having opinions of one's own," said Mrs. McCabe, " but after all there is a time and a place for passing remarks." And as she herself thought it rather a social handicap to be Jewish, so she never permitted, in her

conversation with the Morrises, any reference to that ancient race to which they belonged.

On the second floor lived the Gibsons. Mr. Gibson turned up perhaps twice a year. He was a chief steward on a ship which sailed to China, India and Japan, and Mrs. McCabe would sometimes hint to friendly neighbours that it was perhaps this fact which had induced Mrs. Gibson to marry him. This dark saying was intended to reflect not on the character of the chief steward, who was an industrious and saving man, but on the character of Mrs. Gibson. Mrs. Gibson, it could not be denied, occasionally drank too much. She was a woman with yellow hair, fading into silveriness, tall, strong, and with a worn and rather tired face which nevertheless retained its symmetric structure so well that many could still be found to declare her handsome. Except that her family was larger, and all of them at school (a secondary school at that too), Mrs. Gibson lived a similar life to that of Mrs. McCabe. She did her own housework, shopping, messages, entirely by herself, and devoted what little spare time remained to coaxing and bullying her offspring out of bed in the morning, dispatching them to school in good time, preparing their meals, and repairing their clothes.

When Mrs. Gibson, at intervals of a few months, found this toilsome routine too depressing, she would address herself to whisky for consolation. This would have been quite sufficient to condemn her in the censorious eyes of her neighbours, but Mrs. Gibson, on these occasions, was not content to drink alone in her own room, or even to seek congenial company in a public-house. She would invite a friend to share the bottle with her, and to the scandal of the whole house, and indeed the whole street, more often than not this friend was a member of the other sex.

In particular, he had concluded that it would be wiser not to mention the fact that his father had disappeared from all knowledge. This unnatural secretiveness and caution aroused in him an unconscious resentment against his mother and his sisters, and as he was quite well aware that they were impressed by the excessive learning with which he was being endowed, he used this unscrupulously as a weapon to secure their deference and their personal service to his needs. He was convinced that, by sitting in the living-room and reading his books, by correcting his sisters' pronunciation, and making fun of his mother's generalisations about politics, philosophy, and practical psychology, he was doing them a great courtesy and service. His mother had prepared breakfast for him, and served it; she was now cleaning his boots, and presently she would gather his school-bag, his cap, his coat, and his scarf together, ready for his departure. All that he took for granted.

"Hello, kid," said Nora, entering the room; but George Alexander was immersed in homework which he should have done the previous evening, and did not bother to answer. So Nora walked across the room, pulled the horsehair sofa out of the way, opened a cupboard, and, finding her own and Connie's shoes, began vigorously to clean them.

"I say, Ma," she called through. "Nearly ready yet? I haven't got much time, and Connie's late as it is."

"Coming!" sang her mother's voice.

Presently both pairs of shoes were polished, and Connie had arrived, hungry and taciturn. The two sisters and their brother sat around the table, in the glaring gaslight, eating and drinking and preoccupied with their own thoughts. Their mother stood behind them, holding a cup of tea in her hand, and abstractedly drinking from time to time. She was a small, slight

woman, with little repose in her manner, even when, as now, she was thoughtful. She wore an old tweed skirt and a blouse, with unlaced shoes to serve as slippers. Her thick black hair, greying in patches, was fastened loosely and untidily about her head, and in that livid and flickering light her pale skin looked lustreless and unhealthy. Her nose was thin and high-bridged, and gave to her whole face an eager look, an air of youthfulness out of keeping with the hollowness of her cheeks, and the tightness with which her lips were set. Her large blue eyes, and her strongly-marked brows, were vague in their expression, yet filled with faint and regretful memories of a long-vanished brilliance. Abruptly, she put down the cup and saucer on the mantelpiece, fumbled with nervous fingers for a packet of cigarettes there, and presently struck a match and was smoking.

" Good Lord ! Look at the time ! " came suddenly from Nora. " What are we all thinking about ! Get a move on, Connie."

" Oh, all right, all right. What does it matter if we're a bit late ? "

" Anyhow, I'm not waiting for you this morning. You'll get us both the sack if you go on like this. There are your shoes."

" That's right, rub it in. Tell the whole world you cleaned them for me."

" That's not nice, Connie," said Mrs. McCabe. She picked up the soiled plate and cup and saucer from Nora's place, and carried them into the kitchen-pantry. Nora followed.

" Mother, you've not been sleeping again."

" Do I look awful ? "

" You don't look too bad. Anyhow, you'll be all right when you get a good night's rest. But you

mustn't do it. Really, Ma, you mustn't. Worrying yourself to death about a man who never was any good to you or to any of us. Why can't you forget him?"

"Why can't I?" repeated her mother, softly. "But you're wrong Nora. It isn't the past, it's the future I'm afraid of. I know he'll come back. I just know it."

"Well, if he ever does, I'll deal with him. I'll take care he doesn't get round you this time. I'm not a bit of a girl now, and you know I'm on your side, don't you?" Nora put an affectionate arm round her mother's shoulders, looking closely into the abstracted, tired eyes.

"But I must be off. It won't do any of us any good for me to lose my job, will it? Now, don't be silly, Ma. He's not worth remembering. It's Wednesday to-day, so I'll be home early. Perhaps we'll go out for a walk together, eh?"

"Perhaps."

And Mrs. McCabe hurried back to the sitting-room, to find her daughters' hats and coats, and the library novels with which they enlivened the tedious tramcar journey into town.

5

For three miles down a long road, which scarcely turned from the straight, the tramcar clattered and screamed along its metal path, rocking unsteadily from side to side, and halting and starting again with abrupt jerks which pitched its loosely-hung body to and fro upon the track. The buildings which clustered on either side, without intermission, although diverse in structure and function, were almost uniform in the dingy, faded brickwork, stained grey and black with smoke, of which they were built. Turning from under a railway bridge bedizened with metal advertise-

ments, the tram clanged its way past a barracks and a greyhound racing track, both desolate and deserted in the early morning light. Thereafter, on the right, there rapidly receded a succession of large sprawling, brick buildings, above which protruded the lattice-work of cranes, with the funnels and masts of unmoving steamers occasionally showing. These were the docks and warehouses which lined the northern bank of the Mersey, and from the streets which opened into the main road, as the tram sped past, came blustering sallies of wind, rattling the metal sides of the tram, and sometimes almost bringing it to a standstill, or so it seemed to such of the passengers as were observant of external things.

The roadway, on which a paste of mud was spread after the rainfall of the night, was busy with motor-car, motor-bus, and tramway traffic, all these vehicles endeavouring to speed in two contrary directions, past bicycles and pedestrians, with long trails of horse-drawn lorries, flat-topped and empty, proceeding to pick up their morning loads. The newsagents already were displaying contents bills, roughly clipped onto notice boards, but for the most part the innumerable small shops showed no signs of activity ; each was hiding behind the morning dullness of its windows. Small drapers, with unconvincing posters announcing Sensational Reductions and Huge Clearances, furniture emporiums offering whole bedroom suites for a first payment of half-a-crown, boot-repair shops with some thousands of words displayed at their entrance, sweet-shops and cake-shops, butchers and chemists, bakers with dingy wooden bins of steaming loaves, fruit-shops and public-houses, one and all they looked as oblivious of the passing tramcar as its occupants were of them.

The cinemas, with lattice gates drawn across their portals, seemed least of all to take an interest in the morning. Even the goods-yards of the railway station, three of them, from which there emerged with startling suddenness horse-drawn lorries, charging out against the traffic, seemed incompletely awake. Only the cavernous halls of the fruit-market gave out the full, confused commotion of brisk business in full swing. The people in the street were mostly men, in clothes almost shapeless and dull in colour. In the playground of an elementary school, children, early arrivals, stood and shivered, blew on their hands, and kicked their heels against the mud-stained wall while, beyond the railings, some small girls, in red tam-o'-shanters, played half-hearted games with a skipping-rope. The public library was the newest building in the road, and on its white steps, their backs against the closed doors, three men stood, with hands thrust in the pockets of their buttoned overcoats, stamping their feet, and muttering to each other out of the corners of their mouths. All who glanced at them knew, or would have known had they allowed their thoughts to pause for a few seconds, that these men were waiting to scan free copies of the morning newspapers with their announcements of possible employment.

The tramcar, which made its way unevenly, and at no great speed, along this three miles of dreariness, carried about sixty people, sitting and standing, few of whom were aquainted with any other occupant, or even conscious, beyond the minimum of necessity, of the presence of the others. Those who were sitting, and even many of those who were compelled to stand, read newspapers, magazines or books. This was a feat of some difficulty, for the tramcar moved by a series of unpredictable jolts, and came to a stop every hundred

yards or so, apparently without any premeditation, so that the printed pages danced and jerked before the straining eyes : but working hours were long, and the twenty minutes to half-an-hour which the journey added to them were precious, and not to be wasted upon the contemplation of familiar and depressing street-scenes, still less upon the melancholy introspection natural to a cold morning and an over-hasty breakfast.

Sitting side by side, Nora McCabe and her sister Connie read as steadily as the swaying and plunging of the tramcar would permit, and spoke never a word to each other. This was not because they had quarrelled. It was their normal morning procedure, adopted because their work, five days in the week, kept them away from home rather more than eleven out of the twenty-four hours. So Nora read Ian Hay, and Connie read Cynthia Stockley, thereby escaping, in imagination, the tedium of the familiar journey into the centre of Liverpool.

If the lively surface of their minds was given to romance, the romance of an unreality which would never be their own to know, other more immediate experiences possessed their deeper attention. Both Nora and Connie knew that this was Wednesday and that, therefore, soon after the legal hour of one o'clock they would be free for the remainder of the day. Connie was aware that her vitality was reaching one of its climaxes. Her young and slender body, stronger and firmer and plumper than it had been twelve months ago, was, even so early in the morning, tense and quick with an eagerness for which she had no words. It prompted her to hum a quick dance tune under her breath as she read.

Once, for a second, a jolt from the tramcar, more violent than usual, made her lift her eyes from her book and she caught a reflection of herself in the

window opposite, as a bus ran alongside and made it a temporary and not too realistic mirror. She saw a girl's head, crowned with a close-fitting green felt hat, underneath which showed hair of a dark lustrous red, almost a purple red, and an oval face, with a fashionable peach-bloom complexion and large grey eyes, smiling with a slow and mysterious mantling of light which pleased her. At the same second, she knew that the grey-haired man in the seat in front, at the other side of the gangway, had turned his head and, pretending to stare into the street, was staring at her. She tossed her chin, but there was no dissatisfaction in the smile with which she resumed her book. Grey hairs held no interest for her, and she thought of Maurice Bruno's long glossy hair, so evenly oiled and brushed, with the ivory white streak of the parting never astray. Undoubtedly, there was something very gentlemanly about Maurice, and, at the thought, the strange and palpitating eagerness which informed her that morning became suddenly more vehement in every limb, and for a second she felt almost weak under the influx of physical feeling, curiously and pleasantly weak. A moment later, she was swept out of all consciousness of herself by the next paragraph of the story.

CHAPTER II

S.S. *BENEDICTION*

A SMALL steamship, of rather less than two thousand tons, was making a slow, laborious and noisy passage almost parallel with the coast, which she held to starboard where rocky, grey hillsides sprawled around each other and lost their crests in unstable drifts of heavy storm clouds. The ship was old and, carrying little cargo, she lifted high and angular out of the water, her smoke-stack a thin stalk growing unimpressively out of the massive block of her superstructure. She rode light against the aggressive, spume-capped seas, pitching up and down so that frequently her screw emerged clear into the air and, for a few seconds, the blades raced at furious speed before they lurched under water again.

From an iron doorway, opening onto the afterdeck, the smell of hot engine-oil was blown back, intermingling with the salt-cold stream of the wind through the stays and the derrick-chains. The winches and bollards and the derrick were rustless, but old and worn, built to ugly, out-of-date shapes. The solid bulwark, under its faded paint, was chipped, and the coiled hawser on the port side, with its brilliant gold colouring and its new, tensile, unsoaked fibres, made everything around it seem still older and dingier. A thin rope had been strung across the afterdeck, and the washed dungarees, hung there to dry, flapped in the wind with a melancholy, unsystematic explosiveness.

Two men leaned across the rail, shoulder to shoulder,

staring ahead along the counter of the plunging ship and conversing disputatiously. They were young, broad-shouldered and strong. Their belted trousers, their ribbed woollen vests and knotted neckerchiefs, were stained with sweat and engine-grease, and their teeth, as they argued, glittered white in their begrimed faces.

"We'll dock in an hour," one declared.

"Not for two hours yet. Ay, not for two an' a half!"

"You're talking wet!"

"Listen to buggarlugs! Not for two hours and a half I tell you."

"What'll y' bet?"

"Anything you like."

"Is it on then?"

"Course it is."

"How much?"

"Much as y' like."

"Oh, don't talk wet!"

"Christ, look for yourself! There's the channel, there ahead. But we've got to make the Bar first, and that's away there, before we turn into the river."

"'S teeth, why, we're almost at the Bar now!"

"That's what you say!"

They might have continued their contest of asseverations interminably, without reaching any satisfactory conclusion, had not an older man, short and broad-shouldered, emerged on the afterdeck, and proceeded to remove a pair of trousers from the line. He had a square, serious face, with a skin eruption showing under one eye.

"Here," cried one of the disputants to the other, "this'll settle your hash. Hey," he called aloud through the wind, "you know the Pool, don't you?"

"Like the back of my hand," came the answer.

" Though I've never touched here for donkey's years. What's bitin' you, anyways ? "

" This bastard here's arguin' we'll not be docked for two hours and a half."

" Let's see. That's the Bar light ahead there. And there's a pilot-boat making for it. No, sonny, not that. That's a Cock tug. If we're lucky we ought to be alongside in a couple of hours."

" What did I tell you ! " cried each of the two younger men to the other in triumph. And one added promptly : " There's some good beer in Liverpool, I've been told. That's what I'm wanting. And after that, a nice juicy bit o' skirt, eh ? What do you say, mate ? " he inquired of the older man, who had lifted his greasy, peaked cap and was scratching the top of a head thickly covered with red hair going grey.

" The beer's all right," he replied, hugging the dungarees under one arm and staring over the rail at the low sandy coast of the peninsula approaching on the starboard bow. " But you can keep your tarts. I've done with them."

" You're growing too old for it," laughed the younger man.

The square face with the heavy, folded cheeks scowled at him. " Too old ! I'll bloody well show you if I'm too old. When you can do your watch and earn your money half as well as me, you'll be a man, you blasted milk-reared pup ! "

The younger man refused the quarrel. " All right, dad," he said. " No offence meant. And don't forget to have one with me, soon as we're ashore. Drop o' good beer 'll do us both good."

The grey-haired man nodded and turned away. As he passed through the iron doorway, the man at the rail muttered to his companion : " And he ought to

get some pills too, when he's ashore. He needs something to clear his blood. Did you see his dial?"

"The grub on this bloody hooker," declared the other, spitting over the side, "is something cruel."

CHAPTER III

THE STORE

I

NORA and Connie, leaving the tramcar, hurried round the big display windows of the Store, through the damp side-street to a doorway, in a bleak wall, which was lettered "EMPLOYEES' ENTRANCE." Between the mud-stained walls of the warehouse and the glossy cliff-like eminence of the side of the Store, from both ends of the street, hundreds of other girls, with small groups of men interspersed, were hurrying to their work, some with smiling faces, chattering to each other as they walked, others still with the bleak, preoccupied expression of early morning dimming their eyes and hardening their lips. Connie and Nora found their clocking-in machine, inserted their cards, pulled the lever and hurried inside.

Few lights were on, just one or two here and there to enable the cleaners, still washing the white stone floors at the foot of the stairs and in front of the lifts, to see their work. The wintry daylight which filtered across the huge floors from the windows was grey and dismal. After a night of unhabitation the place was chilly, and the assistants, hurrying to their departments, shivered and glanced at each other with blank, almost hostile looks. The "buying public," upon whom their livelihood depended, was nevertheless their incessant, im-

placable enemy, and they were never tired of exchanging stories to illustrate the stupidity and the malice of their customers : but until the doors opened at 9 a.m. and, in ones and twos, and dozens, this necessary enemy began to percolate through the eight floors in search of hats, coats, saucepans, sheets, beads, gramophones, carpets, permanent waves and corn-cures, curtains and toilet-paper, cigarettes and roast chickens, umbrellas and evening frocks, bedroom suites and attaché cases, and all the other extraordinary articles for which its appetite was so voracious, the Store was unfriendly, almost sepulchral. Hurrying footsteps rang hollow through the empty spaces, everything above eye level seemed to be a desolation of tickets and suspended signs, and all the counters and glass exhibition-cases, covered with huge grey dustsheets, looked forlorn in the shadows. Only two lifts were working, operated by girls who had not yet changed from their outdoor hats and coats into the bright uniforms provided for them.

Nora and Connie were waiting for one of these lifts to descend again to the ground floor, so that they might go to their changing room and put on decorous black frocks with white collar and cuffs, when a brisk voice behind called : " Good morning, Miss McCabe. May I have a word with you ? "

Both Nora and Connie swung round, and found a man in a grey mackintosh, but without a hat, smiling at them : the Advertising Manager. Under one arm he held precariously a leather dispatch case, crammed very full, a large book and two newspapers, and it was obvious that he had forgotten to brush the untidy mass of dun-coloured hair which sprang in all directions from the top of his head and sparkled with raindrops.

He stood regarding the two girls now with a friendliness which both of them, without being able to put their

thoughts into words, recognised as something different from either the severe suspicion or the occasional rough familiarity which they were accustomed to receive from most of those in authority over them.

" Hello," said Connie. Nora, surprised out of the depths of her meditation, could only summon a faint and transient smile.

He addressed himself to Connie at first. " I'm afraid it's your sister I want to speak to," he said. Then he quickly added, as if fearing he might have given offence : " At least, this time. I want to photograph her," he explained.

" What ! " exclaimed Connie. " For advertising, do you mean ? " And, as he nodded, she jerked her head and ejaculated : " Nora ! "

" Is that your name ? " He spoke to Nora now. She nodded.

" Well, tell me, would you object if I asked you to come around and be photographed this morning ? I want to put two of the new Patou models into the magazine—you know, the illustrated thing we're sending out each month to all our customers. There are a couple of new coats—I expect you know them? With the cross-over collar. But do tell me if you don't want to do this sort of thing ? Don't for heaven's sake think you've got to."

" Do you really want to photograph me ? " exclaimed Nora.

" Of course he does, fathead," cried Connie derisively. " And you thank your stars, and say you will. Go on, you may never get another chance."

" Well ? " he inquired. " What do you think about it ? Will you come ? "

" When ? "

" This morning. At ten o'clock."

" Oh, I don't think I possibly could. I'd have to get permission to leave the department."

The Advertising Manager laughed. " I can fix all that for you. Don't worry. I'll see your D.S.M. At any rate I'll 'phone her, and I'll let the Staff Manager know as well. Now tell me, would you really like to come ? Please don't if you have any objection at all."

" Oh, no," said Nora. " I'd love to. Any girl would."

2

The Store was an impressive building with its eight floors filled with merchandise and exhibitions and offices, and visitors were often visibly awed by the marble staircases, the thirty lifts, the escalators, the concert hall, and the five restaurants—above all, perhaps, by the great vistas on each floor, from end to end. Nora McCabe, however, had spent twelve years in its employ, starting in the almost forgotten past, as a little girl, with plaits and frightened eyes, running messages. She was now charge-hand of the model coat department. " Charge-hand " was the name for Assistant Departmental Sales Manager : not that Nora was ever permitted to regard herself as occupying any managerial status.

In twelve years the Store had become so familiar an environment that she was hardly aware of it. In those twelve years she had watched incuriously four floors added, and the frontage nearly doubled. Of this sustained enlargement she had sometimes been proud, seeing it commented upon and illustrated in the newspapers, and hearing her friends exclaim about it ; but of her own accord she had felt little but exasperation at the constant moving of her stock from one place to another, and the inconvenience of

finding that another department, or one of the offices, had, overnight, been transported from the west end of the fifth floor to the south corner of the basement. During those twelve years also, the coats she sold had become more fashionable in cut and material, and more expensive in price, and the customers to whom she sold them had changed, so that nowadays (except on Saturday, a day which all the staff hated because it meant still harder work and for two extra hours) the Store was filled with better dressed, more assured, politer and more profitable customers. Of all this, if you had asked her, Nora was perfectly aware, but she had accepted it so gradually into her consciousness that such a statement in words would have reached her with the slight shock of a new discovery.

She knew almost every inch of the sixteen acres of floor space, and almost every one of the two thousand people employed in the Store. She could find her way, without a moment's pause for thought, through all the pathways, carefully arranged between the counters and stands of merchandise, and along the hidden passages not open to the public. Out of all the bewildering array of tickets and hanging signs and streamers and " demonstrations " and announcements, and the million varieties of purchasable goods, her attention selected only what was new or differently arranged from the order of yesterday. Similarly, as she went about the Store, her eyes never paused upon a customer, unless that customer were eccentric or unusually well dressed. For her, the Store was peopled by its staff; and customers, until they entered her own department, were so many mobile but uninteresting irrelevances.

When she had changed into her formal blackmarocain frock, with its severe lace collar and cuffs, and

put away her " street clothes " carefully in her locker, Nora quitted a lift on the second floor, and, walking some one hundred and fifty yards, paid no attention whatever to the hats and frocks, and knitted suits and jumpers, and shoes, which were being brought out again, for she had inspected them all thoroughly the previous week, nor did she spare a glance for the electrician testing the efficiency of the moving signs, the charwoman swabbing the floor, or the five early customers, pushing inquisitive noses around the outsize department, but walked swiftly, her whole personality securely wrapped in the secret cocoon of her own thoughts. She was pleased and excited by the prospect of breaking her daily routine for a few hours. She was also a little dubious about the reception she would meet from her Departmental Manager, Miss Renshaw, when she announced that she was going to be photographed as an advertisement for the Store. It would all depend, she decided, upon Renny's morning mood—and no one could ever guess what that might be.

Reaching the model coat department, she found her five assistants already at work, some uncovering the rails on which most of the coats were hung, others unpacking in the stockrooms, behind the larger showcases, and one dusting and re-arranging the wax figures exhibited within little wooden fences along the frontage of the department. Behind the glass-screened desk, which served Miss Renshaw as an office, a shadowy silhouette of head and shoulders appeared. The Departmental Manager was reading her morning correspondence, and inspecting the copy-orders from the Head Buyer. For a moment Nora paused indecisively, wondering whether the Advertising Manager had already broken the news by telephone, or whether it would be diplomatic to step up and make the an-

nouncement herself. She decided it would be safer to do a little work first, so she ordered Heyward, the platinum blonde, whose appearance she secretly both envied and disliked, to abandon the uncovering of her stock, and tidy up the fitting-room. Then she took Barnes, the first saleswoman, and spent ten minutes discussing with her the attractions of an Irish frieze coat at nine guineas, with chromium metal buttons and a two-way collar, as compared with a Yorkshire tweed, with velvet collar and cuffs and a half-belt, at eight guineas. One or the other was needed for the centre piece of the main display facing the lift gates.

This discussion had yet to come to a satisfactory conclusion when Nora heard a sharp voice calling her name across the floor. Looking up, she saw one of the assistants nodding and waving towards the glass-screened desk, and there was Miss Renshaw standing up and beckoning towards her with a frown on her face.

Trouble! thought Nora, with the sickening and stupefying apprehension familiar to those under severe authority. She hurried across to the desk.

"Good morning, Miss Renshaw. What is it?"

"It's this check-proof, Miss McCabe," said Miss Renshaw, peering over her spectacles, and wrinkling her forehead under her bobbed grey hair. "I left you to give the description to the Advertisement Department, and here's the proof for the first day's advertisement—going in the paper to-night!—of our Spring Fashion Display. It talks about the five-guinea coat—that's the new season's leading line—'featuring the Prince of Wales' check.' Now what on earth does that mean? Is it one of the funny tricks the Advertising Department is always playing? Or is it some fancy idea of your own that you've thought up?"

"Oh, that?" exclaimed Nora. "Yes, I put it in. Didn't you read the paper yesterday?"

"What paper? The *Post*? The *Echo*? The *Express*? What does it mean, anyhow?"

"Only that the Prince of Wales is supposed to be popularising this check. He wore it for a golfing suit, and the papers are taking it up. I thought it would be worth while if we followed up the idea."

"Oh, did you? And what on earth have women's fashions to do with men's?"

"Ah, but this was in the women's fashion notes. I showed it to Miss Clare, from the Advertising, and she thought it was a good idea."

"Oh, did she? Well, I suppose it might help. I'll ring up Miss Clare myself. Or wait a minute, I'll have a word with the Advertising Manager."

Nora realised then that Miss Renshaw was still unaware that her charge-hand was to spend the greater part of the morning away from the department. The situation, umpromising as it was, must be taken by storm at once, or else there would develop a row, and, like everyone else in a subordinate position in the Store, Nora would do a great deal to avoid a row.

"I wish you would," she said. "He's asked me to go and be photographed this morning. For the monthly circular, you know. I expect it's to wear one of these coats, but I don't rightly know."

Miss Renshaw took off her glasses, and stared with stupefied, short-sighted eyes. "You? You be photographed? But you're a charge-hand! I never heard of such a thing! It's all very well for them to come and take away some of my junior assistants. I understand that. But surely, Miss McCabe, you realise . . ."

Nora trembled with indignation, and felt the blood ebbing from her cheeks. "I'm not so old as all that

Miss Renshaw," she declared. " Anyhow, they've asked me to go, and unless you insist, I will go."

" Who said I was going to refuse ? " cried Miss Renshaw. " I was merely expressing my surprise. After all, I suppose there's no arguing about taste. If the Advertising Manager thinks you'll look attractive, and make our customers want to buy our coats, of course, I'm delighted. I must say, he might have chosen a more suitable time to take my charge-hand away than the day before our Spring Fashion Event starts ! Nevertheless, I never was one to stand in the way of the true interests of the Store, and if the Advertising Manager asks me, of course I shall say Yes. But I repeat, I am considerably astonished. You're quite sure, Miss McCabe, you didn't dream that this happened to you ? "

Nora made no reply.

" At what time do you expect to go to the photographers ? "

" Ten o'clock."

" And I don't suppose you'll be back for the rest of the morning, eh ? Ah well ! I shall be interested to see how the photographs turn out. But please, Miss McCabe, don't think yourself at liberty to go yet. I have not been officially requested, either by the Advertising Manager or the Staff Manager. When they approach me, I will send for you, and let you know where you are to report. In the meantime, you'd better get down to the Receiving Room, and see if those seventy-five gabardine coats have arrived. If they have, get them rushed up here. Off you go now."

The telephone on the desk gave out a violent tin-tinnabulation, and as Nora turned away, she heard Miss Renshaw, in a much softer and more courteous voice, saying into the receiver : " Yes, Miss McCabe

has just been talking to me about it. Of course, you realise it's very inconvenient, but if you'll promise that my coats get the two middle pages in next month's issue, of course I've no objection. All right, she'll be there at ten o'clock."

Dear God, thought Nora to herself, hurrying away, the joy of escaping for a few hours !

3

After the heat and the electric lighting of the Store, the wind in the street was fresh, and the sudden sunlight so dazzling that her eyes blinked. To leave the Store at this unwonted hour gave her a keen sense of adventure.

" We're going through the station," said the Advertising Manager. " It isn't the shortest way, but I'd like to look at a poster. That is, if you don't mind ? "

Once again she was astonished to find anyone in authority considerate of her wishes. She laughed aloud, partly from joy at being outdoors at such an hour, and partly from the pleasure of receiving unexpected courtesy.

" It's all one to me," she said. " It's great fun to be out at all. I'd just love to fly down to the Pier Head, and look at the river. You see, I'm never . . . " She looked at him, unable to speak further. She was realising, painfully and wordlessly, that, year after year, she was a prisoner in the great eight-floored Store, now left behind her. Every day, from breakfast time till supper time, she had no freedom to go out into the streets. On the only occasions she saw them they were transformed by all the differences which belonged to Sundays, Bank Holidays, and half-holidays. She looked around her now, noticing the leisured and well-dressed air of the women glancing into shop windows,

alighting from or entering their limousine cars, talking to each other with bright, social faces. These were women different in kind from herself, emancipated by their husband's or their father's income from the duress of economics, women who were able to order their own time. She had scarcely ever seen them before, except within the Store, in their special function of customers demanding her service. With what superb confidence they bore themselves, how easily and elegantly they wore their expensive clothes, with what an assured air of importance they discussed their turkish baths, and bridge parties, and charity organisations! And here she was walking among them with a man who, as an automatic, unconscious courtesy, took the outer edge of the pavement! Who could tell but that some envious passer-by might mentally be classifying her with these ladies of leisure? She thrilled to the idea.

After a pause, however, the Advertising Manager answered her uncompleted speculation.

"I don't think it would be wise for us to make a run to the Pier Head. And, anyhow, the photographing will take all morning, and after one o'clock your time's your own."

They had entered the railway station, and were now standing on the stone staircase leading out to the street.

On a hoarding stretched beside the stairs was pasted a large paper poster, covered with bright coloured lettering, and several vivacious depictions of young women in hats and coats and frocks. The lettering announced:

FASHION FESTIVITIES ALL THIS WEEK. COME AND SEE THE PARADE OF WEST-END MANNEQUINS, SHOWING ALL THE NEW STYLES. TURN RIGHT WHEN YOU LEAVE THE STATION.

" Well, what do you think of it ? " asked the Advertising Manager.

Nora did not know what to think or what to say. " It's very nice," she ventured. The Advertising Manager smiled. " You mean, you think it's pretty ? But do you think people will pay attention to it ? Do you think they'll want to come and buy ? "

" Oh, I'm sure they will."

" I hope so. I believe so. You see, next week this poster-site will be flood-lighted. That ought to stop the blighters as they go past."

The photographer's studio was not nearly so impressive as she had expected. It consisted of two small rooms at the top of a long rickety staircase. The photographer and his wife met them at the head of the stairs, and led them into the studio itself. This was a small room, furnished with a brown leather couch, two stools, a framework hung with curtains, a number of canvas screens, and five or six arc-lamps. The solitary camera stood on its tripod amid a litter of boxes and brown paper parcels. There were only two small windows, and they afforded such poor light that dark shadows lay across the room, and the four figures standing there were almost obscured from each other. Nora felt an immediate sense of drooping disappointment.

" Has the stuff come over ? " the Advertising Manager asked.

The photographer and his wife made reassuring noises, and indicated the pile of parcels.

" Ah ! Let's have a look." He produced a penknife, and, cutting the strings here and there, revealed that the parcels contained a miscellaneous assortment of coats and hats, frocks and gowns, furs and shoes and stockings.

" Here's your little lot, Miss McCabe. I think you'll find they'll fit. Two coats—there they are. And these hats, which we'll take as portraits if you don't mind. Now, let's see, you'd better wear these shoes and these stockings with them, and when you've changed, we'll find you a handbag and some gloves. Here's the make-up box, and I'm afraid that's the only mirror. Can you manage ? "

Norah looked at the small oval glass, bearing a printed advertisement for whisky, which was suspended precariously above the mantelpiece.

" Oh, yes, that'll do nicely," she said, concealing her disappointment. " And where do I change, please ? "

" In here."

Nora stared at him.

He laughed aloud. " Oh, don't worry, we'll go out."

" My wife will help you, if you like," said the photographer, but Nora preferred to be alone.

" If I could have a little light," she pleaded. And the Advertising Manager pressed down a switch, giving her, quite literally, a little light and no more.

Left alone in the studio, she shivered for a moment by the fireside, although the gas fire there was burning brightly. But the lipstick, the copious powder, the rouge and the eyebrow pencil lent her confidence. Under the dabbings and hatchings, smearings and smoothings and blendings, her face was simplified into a brilliant, rather hard but fashionably correct mask of beauty. When she sat down to remove her stockings, and to pull on the soft, exquisite webs of silk provided for her, she enjoyed a thrill, a sudden disarming rapture of luxury. These were stockings such as she had often dreamed of, but never believed she would be privileged to wear. True, they were hers only for the morning,

only in order that they might be photographed, so that other, more fortunate, women might be persuaded to buy their like. Still, they were hers for now, and she sang little tunes of joy to herself as she surveyed her long, silken, outstretched, unrecognisably voluptuous legs. The evening frock of printed crêpe, shaped with puff shoulders and a bound-in bodice, and figured all over with an elegant geometric design in scarlet, flowed deliciously soft over her breast, clung firmly at her waist, and finally swept in long folds to her feet. She shook herself, partly to settle the gown into place, and partly as an instinctive expression of delight in wearing such expensive clothing. If only, she thought, the light were better, and there were a full-length mirror, she would be able to see how she looked. Almost as impressive, she would swear, as the ladies she sometimes saw from the front of the gallery, preceding their whiteshirted escorts into the stalls of the theatre. She patted her hair into place, and then called out, " You may come in now."

When they came, one after another, she felt their glances, swift, casual, transient, appraising her.

" Will I do ? " she asked, her nervousness returning.

" It looks fine, Miss McCabe," said the Advertising Manager. " This photograph is going to be a great success. Don't you worry. All you have to do is to keep still—and you needn't do that until you're told. It's really as easy as falling off a wall, isn't it ? "

The photographer shook his head. " There's more to it than that," he said solemnly, and at once began to busy himself about the room, turning switches, and adjusting curtains here and there. Suddenly, as the switches clicked, the darkness fled, and from all the arc-lamps poured a warm and brilliant white light.

Nora felt it beating upon her skin, and dazzling on her eyes, and unconsciously she set her shoulders back, and felt a strange, a heartening, an almost physically sparkling vitality emanating from her.

" She takes the light, she takes the light ! " exclaimed the Advertising Manager, with satisfaction. " You'll make a good job of this one," he remarked to the photographer, who replied abstractedly : " Oh yes, she'll do, she'll do."

The morning slid swiftly by with all the speed of novel experience. Nora stood between the curtains while the photographer—she never discovered his name—inclined the lamps playing upon her, first at this angle, and then at that, draping some of them with soft muslin cloths, and reflecting others against the white ceiling, and finally disappearing under the velvet cloth of his camera, which he moved to and fro, muttering inarticulate noises to himself. Then, appearing again, the photographer bade her turn this way and that, talking the while about highlights and shadows and values, and disputing vehemently with the Advertising Manager. At last both men agreed upon a pose, and then Nora was told to " hold it." This meant that she had to stay perfectly still, not even allowing the silk folds of the frock to ripple or sway a fraction of an inch. At first this brought her physical and mental discomfort but, after two or three poses, she found she could allow her thoughts to wander away in day-dreams about herself and Ben. She was photographed turning to the right, turning to the left, with bent head, and with shoulders set back, in three successive evening gowns. Then she changed again, and was photographed striding along, with a totally imaginary dog (out of the picture) at the end of a leash, watching an imaginary racehorse, upon which she had placed an imaginary

bet, gallop past the winning post, and waving goodbye to an imaginary friend upon an imaginary ship. For the last of these poses she had to be exhorted not to " take it so seriously " and to " look cheerful," for it had come into her mind that, if the luck changed for Ben, she would all the same have to face the prospect of many partings from him.

After that, the photographer's wife brought in coffee, and they all drank and smoked for a few minutes, and she was left alone once more to change into the second coat. Afterwards she stood, at first lax, and then tense, while she was photographed descending a flight of steps, which would appear only when a retouching artist had painted them upon the negative, opening a handbag to give sixpence to a quite invisible blind man in the street, and smiling gaily to the wealthy but non-existent scion of an aristocratic family. When that was finished, she sat upon a stool, and the photographer moved the camera nearer to her, and lowered it on its tripod. This was to photograph a succession of three hats, which she changed rapidly.

" Twenty minutes to one," announced the Advertising Manager. " That's the lot. Thank you very much indeed, Miss McCabe."

" What, twenty to one already ! " exclaimed Nora.

" Already ! " mimicked the Advertising Manager. " When I was in London, we'd have taken two full days over a job like this."

" Shall I change then ? " inquired Nora.

" Yes, as quick as you like. Otherwise, you'll be losing part of your afternoon off."

At that moment the photographer entered the room, with a piece of paper in his hand. " Look ! " he exclaimed, " I've got a rough print of the first one. It's good. You'll like it."

" Let's see," said the Advertising Manager eagerly. " Come on, Miss McCabe. Have a look at yourself."

He took the print, and led her over to the solitary arc-lamp which remained burning. Side by side, they examined the photograph.

" I can't believe it's me," declared Nora, staring at the graceful and confident young woman in the photograph, so poised, so superb, so—Nora's mind giddily leaped at the word—ladylike in her grand evening gown.

" I told you, I told you," said the Advertising Manager. " It'll make a first-class photograph when you've spotted it and cleaned up the lines a bit."

" It's been a satisfactory morning altogether," said the photographer.

" Of course, Miss McCabe," continued the Advertising Manager, " this is only a first rough print. It will be finished afterwards. But aren't you pleased with it? "

" I'm thrilled," said Nora. " I'd no idea I could be made to look like that."

Her glance went from the photograph to the frock itself, which was lying draped across the corner of the leather couch.

The Advertising Manager's glance followed hers, and then he saw, showing underneath the silk, the cheap and shabby serge of her own frock, the coarse texture of the artificial silk of her stockings, with a darn at the heels and a ladder mended, her gloves so old that they were rumpled out of shape, and the tiny limp disc of her home-knitted woollen cap.

CHAPTER IV

PAID OFF

"ANY reason why we shouldn't sign on the same crew again?" inquired the captain, offering a cigarette to the Board of Trade official sitting beside him.

"No, sir, I don't think so," returned the Mate promptly.

"What about you, Chief?"

"No trouble, sir, except with that greaser I was telling you about. I'm getting tired of his lip."

"I remember. What is he—a Mick?"

The Chief Engineer's face, a heavy mask of slow-developing thought and obdurate conviction, nodded gravely.

"Yes, sir. Insubordinate and unreliable, like all those Irishers. This specimen's got no idea o' discipline at all. Always muttering to himself. He has a bad influence on the whole watch. We'd be well rid of him. Besides, he's past his best. Must be fifty if he's a day."

"Let's have a squint at his book! *Cappodocia*—then the *Skyros*. That would be when Ned Rimmer was her master. *Alice Hayes*—*Vulcan*. On the China run, too. *Bandalore*—*Evelyn Hope*—*Heart's Delight*—*Maid of Orleans*. The man's got a good enough record. A few drunks, but damn it all, Chief, if the poor devils didn't get lit up when they go ashore, they'd never stick the life. Besides, I don't like parting with a man when he's just too old to find another ship easily. Especially these days. I'm not so young as

I'd like to be, myself. Tell you what, put him back on firing for the next trip. Tell him it's that or be paid off and finish. He won't like it, but it ought to do him a world of good. You can put him through it when you get him in the stokehold. Sweat the rebelly Irish out of him, eh ? "

" Very good, sir." The Chief Engineer acquiesced, but sulkily, and the Captain's shrewd eyes gleamed with amusement.

" I'll do the job myself," he announced briskly. " Fetch him in right now."

The Chief Engineer opened the door of the cabin, leaned out, and coughed a name up from the depths of his chest. A short, grey-haired man came in, moving his thick-set body with a jaunty deliberation. He had a big round head and wore a soft, grease-stained cap, with a shiny peak tilted at a precarious angle above his forehead. His dark face was broad, but so deeply ridged, and the skin so tightly stretched under a stubble of grey beard, that it looked thin and worn. Over one cheekbone a skin eruption, cored with crimson and ringed with a spreading yellowness, splashed the drabness of his appearance, the habitual fatigue, still faintly insolent, of his bearing. His brows, however, springing thick and red above the agile suspicion of his flickering eyes, indicated that he had not yet exhausted the vigour of his turbulent manhood.

" Take your money," said the Captain, as the Board of Trade official pushed notes and coins across the table. " Sign your name, quick. I want to talk to you."

" Don't mind if I count before I sign ? " inquired the man. " Habit of a lifetime. No reflections meant." And he rustled his fingers through the notes before he swept them away. The silver and copper he took for granted, in a comprehensive fistful.

" Now listen to me," exclaimed the Captain. " We sail again to-night, to pick up a cargo at Barry Docks."

The tangled red brows shot up, the narrow eyes glinted pallid mockeries across the table.

" That's O.K. by me. No booze and no women in the Pool? I understand. I'd like to go ashore, though. Fact is, I haven't been here for donkey's years. Grown sentimental about the place. But I'll come aboard in good time, never fear. *And* fit and sober."

" I'm glad to hear it," said the Captain. " But just hold that tongue of yours a moment and listen, for a change. You're the only man I'm paying off here. The rest of the crew will draw their money and take their shore leave at Barry."

The furrow from the man's sharp nose down to the corners of his mouth deepened and darkened. His squat body shifted into a tense attitude.

" Meanin', I quit? "

" Shut up and listen. You don't quit. Not but what I believe I'm doing less than my duty in keeping you on. I've had very bad reports on your conduct. You give more trouble than any other man in the engine-room, more than all the rest o' the crew put together. You're insubordinate. You're not willing. You're always muttering to yourself. You're a thorough-going sea lawyer, that's what you are. Too much answering back. Too much chewing the fat. If I thought you had any influence with the other men, I'd have you out of the ship, here and now. But I'll give you one more chance. Only one. You understand? "

The stained lips twisted and trembled, pulled to one side of the muscular jaw, and shaped themselves for a second into an ugly, pendulant loop.

" What y're getting at? What d'you want to pay me off for and not the rest o' my shipmates? "

" Because you'll sail next trip as a fireman. It'll teach you a lesson. If you behave yourself decently in the stokehold, and I get a good report, then I'll consider making you a greaser again."

The pale eyes were no longer dull and fatigued. They sparkled with anger. " Jesus Christ ! Back to the furnaces ? Me ? At my age ? With my record ? I'll see you all in hell first."

" There's plenty of younger men," said the Captain.

The heavy shoulders under the dungaree jacket set back to a defiant angle. " Younger men ! I've shot 'em. Think I'm afraid of unem-bloody-ployment, do you ? Well, I'm not. Here, sign my book and I'll get off your blasted hooker as fast as I can. Trimming furnaces ! That's coolie's work, that is. You can keep your bloody shovels and slices. Put 'em where the monkey put the nuts. That goes for you, Chief. All right, Captain, I've nothing against you. You and me don't hardly cross each other's paths, and I know you've only said what you're in duty bound to say. But let me tell you, I'm a man, not a holy Eible-reading Scotch engineer. I'm glad to get out of it. No ill-will, Captain. I know who's responsible for this, and it's not you. So long."

He turned and, making a lewd gesture with his fingers at the Chief Engineer he slouched out of the cabin.

CHAPTER V

THE FORESHORE

I

"BE quick!" called Mrs. McCabe, as her daughters entered the house. "Dinner's all ready. George Alexander's started. He's got to play football this afternoon. He's in the second team. Isn't that exciting?"

Pulling off their hats and coats, Nora and Connie hurried into the room, and sat down at once to the table.

"Good for you, kid," said Connie, attempting to pat her brother on the head. He shook her hand off impatiently, and went on eating his pudding. Mrs. McCabe appeared from the kitchen with a saucepan in her hand, from which she ladled a warm mash of stew on to their plates.

"And I say, Ma," Connie added, "Nora's going to be a film star before you know where you are. What'll you say when you're able to toddle round to the pictures, and see your own daughter giving the air to Marlene Dietrich?"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Oh, it hasn't come to that!" Connie giggled. "Not yet. But Nora's made a start. She's spent most of the morning being photographed."

"Go on!" was Mrs. McCabe's only comment before she turned her back on them, and retired to the kitchen again. When she returned, Connie assured her, "But it's perfectly true."

George Alexander glared up from his plate. "Who'd want to photograph Nora?" he inquired.

The harassed mother looked from one to the other

of her children. "What are you all talking about?" she demanded. "You're the only sensible one, Nora. Tell me what Connie means."

"Oh, I expect you'll be just as sarcastic as the rest of them," said Nora. "I was photographed this morning, for the 'Fashion Magazine.' That's all."

"So you see, Ma," exclaimed Connie, "we've all been mistaken about poor little Cinderella after all. We must have been blind all these years. *I* didn't get asked. At least, the Advertising Manager did say something about giving me a chance some day. But it was Nora he wanted, and off she went with him to a studio all morning. Isn't it scandalous?"

"Well, I declare!" Mrs. McCabe still looked puzzled. "And when shall we be seeing the photographs? Anyhow, Nora dear, don't you mind what anyone says to you. I'm sure you'll look nice. But what a pity they didn't take you a few years ago. You were fresh and blooming then."

Nora said nothing, but began to eat.

"And I wonder what Ben will have to say about this?" her mother commented, sitting down herself to table.

"I wonder," said Connie, with a mischievous glance at her sister, "if this will make our worthy engineer feel jealous."

"Jealous? It'll make him proud, if I know Ben," declared Mrs. McCabe.

Nora looked up, her face sharp and red. "It's got nothing to do with Ben, and it's got nothing to do with any of you. And I wish you'd leave him and me alone. I'm sick to death of your nasty remarks."

"Golly!" They all turned and gazed at George Alexander.

"What's the matter?" asked his mother anxiously.

"It's only just occurred to me," he said earnestly.

" I don't know that I ought to have eaten this pudding, as I'm playing this afternoon. I really ought to have thought about it. It may ruin our chances. You see, if I'm not at the top of my form, we might lose the match. I wish you'd thought about it, Ma, and warned me. You really ought to have done, you know."

" Oh, dear, I'm so sorry." Mrs. McCabe's expression was all alarm and contrition. " Do you really think it might affect your playing ? "

George Alexander considered the problem with solemnity. " Well," he decided at last, " it's not as if I'd gone into training, strict training that is. Still, I ought not to have eaten it. I'm sure of that, now. I'm going to play well, but I think I should have played even better if I'd left the pudding alone. Next time, Ma, would you please make a note not to let me forget ? "

Nora suddenly began to laugh. It was high-pitched, hysterical, sustained laughter.

" If that's the way you're going to behave," declared George Alexander, with dignity. " I'll be getting along. It's time I went, anyhow."

His mother rose to accompany him to the door.

" Good luck, kid," called Connie. " And, remember, if you can't play the ball, play the man. That's what Maurice always says."

" Oh, Maurice ! " said Nora.

" And what's the matter with Maurice, I'd like to know ? " demanded Connie, rounding on her sister.

" Oh, nothing, I suppose. There's no accounting for tastes, that's all. After all, it's you who has to put up with him."

Connie glared at her. " Put up with him ! Jealous, that's what you are. Jealous because I've got a boy, and he's making money, and yours isn't ! "

" Shut up, will you ! Here, Ma," called Nora. " I'm going out. Connie can help with the washing-up for once. See you later."

2

When Nora left the 'bus, and turned down the narrow path to the sea, great gusts of wind met her, pushing at her whole body with gigantic buffets, sometimes halting her in mid-stride and leaving her balanced precariously on one foot, sometimes taking an abrupt strangle-hold on her throat and squeezing the breath out, so that she was left gasping and feverishly hot until the next rush of cold air swept against her. For a few minutes she felt wretched ; the skin of her face seemed to shrivel, and then to stiffen uncomfortably. In her hands and her feet the bones ached wearily. These miseries passed, and soon the wind no longer stormed the vitality out of her body, but seemed to fill her with its own tempestuousness, to sting her blood into swifter courses. She stepped out with a longer stride, threw back her head, letting the wind thrust cold ruffling fingers through her hair, and walked with her breasts, under the thin blouse and loose-textured coat, thrust out wide and defiant against the tempest.

The lane was little more than a cart track, wet underfoot and with pools of muddy water in the long deep ruts. Nora had put on old shoes and darned stockings, so she splashed steadily ahead, gladly surrendering to the solitude and to the hypnotism of physical exertion her self-consciousness, her dual conception of herself as a secret and incommunicable spirit, and herself as one person among others, a creature who behaved. The healing simplifications of loneliness

closed around her more and more firmly, until at last she had achieved a unity of her self. This mood was refuge and sustenance. Here she was so much herself that she was not even aware of it ; thought and feeling, recollection and experience, flowed softly through her, without effort, without stimulus, and in the flowing they were her. No fear of what others might think or say, now or in the future, no hope of approval, and no complication from the bewildering society of other people troubled her. She had escaped as she walked, even from time and space, for her reverie, with a dream-like omnipotence, swept her perceptions of the present scene and mingled them with remembered perceptions of her home, of the Store, of the city, of her school days, and anything else her fancy selected, while the easy, agile focus of her mind flitted to and fro between past and future, and even lingered occasionally upon the tapered point of the present moment.

She was not happy—she had come out to the shore to ponder her anxiety—but for this brief interval she achieved a simple satisfaction : she possessed the illusion of commanding her life, of viewing it like a detached and distant panorama. The satisfaction lay in the feeling of detachment, and the detachment was due solely to the fact that for an hour or two she was alone, a little flicker of consciousness walking, invisible and impalpable, locked within a parcel of clothed flesh which moved through so much inanimate and undemanding scenery.

The lane rose uphill as it passed between dark pine-woods creaking and sighing in the wind, and then it dipped again into a hollow before foundering in the sandhills. Nora trudged through fine yielding sand up the last slope, and then stood for a second, the wind

whistling in her ears and moulding her clothes to her body, so that her two thighs, as her coat blew open, were shaped under the skirt, long and large and heroic. By now, she was cold from head to foot, but her flesh had tensed itself to meet the onslaught. Her breasts were chill, but firm; she upheld them like ramparts on the arched pride of her body besieged by the wind.

The whole width and length of the estuary lay before her, an expanse of slate-grey turbulent water polished into silvered lustres and glittering hazes along the coast of the Wirral peninsula, where the afternoon sun thrust down through the clouds long shafts of pallid light. Seawards, the sky was still dark with storm clouds, but the horizon was clearly marked now, a thin line pencilled from side to side across the scene. Upon this line, tiny and apparently suspended in a dazzle of light, stood five steamers, five miniature silhouettes of mast and hull and smoke-stacks, and not one of them seemed to move. Coming or going, or loitering for a pilot, they were not within the dominion of the estuary.

Everywhere else the traffic of a great seaport was busy on the waters, busy with that deliberate and unhurrying motion which abstracts the sea from the hysterias of modern civilisation. A fleet of trawlers stood out to round the lower edge of the promontory on the south, and a dredging vessel, with smoke drifting untidily from the narrow tube of funnel set symmetrically in the stern, pushed slowly up the northern channel between the bobbing scarlet buoys which marked the hidden sandbanks. Eastward, where the estuary narrowed, and the city gathered its tall roofs and towers along the waterfront, ferry steamers, some with white funnels, some with red, crossed every few minutes from shore to shore, intersecting with tugs and pilot-boats.

Two transatlantic liners, which had missed the top of the tide and were waiting to dock on the ebb, swung out in the mid-stream, abreast the Gladstone Dock, and, with their vast superstructures and wide smoke-stacks, immobile amid so many ferryings and towings, dwarfed the rest of the river traffic.

As Nora walked over the white, ribbed sands to the water's edge, crushing underfoot a litter of pink shells and draggled seaweed, there formed, on the fringe of her awareness, a conception of the estuary as it affected her life. This conception remained with her, on and off, as long as she lived, but it was never formulated; it was always remote, and slightly out of focus, something she apprehended rather than understood, and so something which frightened her. Upon the inevitable, irregular tide of the Mersey, rising and falling, scouring deep channels here and there, shifting unseen sandbanks from one charting to another, flooding the docks at calculable hours, befouling the shores with the soaked flotsam of its muddy waters, uncovering the wet sands and creeping up again across them when they were dry and sparkling, investing the city with sudden streaming fogs, and despatching the violent wind (which now assaulted Nora with keener persistence than before) to rattle the doors and windows of all the riverside houses; upon the tides of the estuary her father had abruptly departed, and upon them again he might, any day, return, to her mother's dismay, to her own despair. Again, because the estuary was now not half so busy as in its prime, because so many ships lay week by week under the derricks of the dock-walls, her lover was penniless and desperate, economically unwanted. Ben was doomed, unless the estuary relented and changed its moods, to be merely her lover. and never her husband

and the father of her children. Near and far, directly or deviously, the estuary was her master, capricious, cruel, impersonal.

She stared at the grey waves tumbling and racing with breakings of dirty foam towards her, she stared with intense but undirected hatred, and thrust her body through the stubborn, screaming wind with vehement urges of anger. But the estuary was vast; this way and that it expanded before her, receding inland into cloudy obscurity, and spreading westward into the infinite horizon of the sea. Before such a limitless, featureless desolation, her anger faltered, halted and was swept away with the wind. There remained in her mind only an uneasiness, where the memory of her father lingered, a symptom from which she was herself detached, an impersonal observer. She knew, however, that later the detachment would end, the unease would become a torment, an agony of unfulfilment and apprehension, and then it would possess her, then she would be no longer the spectator but the victim.

She remembered her father as she had seen him last, years ago, when he had come to her school, and asked for her. It was the mid-morning break, on a July day, sultry with thunderous heat. In her tattered gingham frock, she was pushing and shouting with a dozen other girls, waiting for her turn at the fountain.

"Eh, Nora," someone called. "There's a man at the gate says he wants to talk to you."

But the iron pillar was hers now, and her throat felt parched. The blood in her temples throbbed. So she pressed the cold brass button, saw the water gush forth, crystal and cool, wiped the nozzle with a hasty hand as a tribute to hygiene, bent over and drank.

When she stood upright again, her mouth and cheeks bedabbled, " What's that you were saying ? " she cried.

No one answered, and swiftly she was elbowed out of the thirsty crush. As she turned away, she saw him standing at the locked gates of the school playground, peering through the railing, a little stocky man in a blue suit, with a bowler hat tilted over one eye. There was a flower in his button-hole, and she noticed at once that he carried a bag in his hand, resting it on the parapet of the wall, against the railings. He raised the other hand and beckoned to her. She walked across the hot gravel slowly, disturbed because this part of her home life should intrude on her school life, and ashamed because her father was never quite like other men. Not that this morning he failed to make a respectable appearance, as her standards went, for she saw that he was shaved and wore a collar and tie. Only, he wore them queerly, just as his ordinary hard hat sat queerly on his big round head. He could not do anything quite like anyone else—and he was proud of the difference, pleased with himself.

" Hello, Dad," she greeted him.

" You might 'a come across a bit quicker," he told her, his little grey eyes sharp and resentful under the tufted reddish brows. His lips hardly moved as he spoke, the furrows in his dark face deepening a little, and the words spitting out sideways through the corner of his mouth.

He was, Nora decided, in one of his queer moods. So she said nothing, but, glowing with heat and glistening with sweat, watched him through the railings.

His manner softened, quite suddenly. His shoulders set back at a jaunty angle when he had dropped his bag to the ground. He clutched a railing with one hand.

" I want you to give a message to your Ma. Now,

listen carefully and don't forget. Tell her I found a ship, only I got to sail at once. On the next tide. A good berth it is this time. Long voyage too. Why, we might go right round the world. I'll make a bit o' money this trip. I'm going to save, see. Tell your Ma that, will you ? "

" Have you made out your allotment money ? " asked Nora, practical and distrustful beyond her years.

" Allotment ? Oh, yes. I done that all right. Tell your Ma not to worry about that."

Nora knew he was lying. " What's the boat you're sailing on ? " she demanded. " Is Ma to apply to the Elder Dempster office again ? "

Her father regarded her with blinking, mocking eyes. He sang softly, half to himself :

My old man's a fireman,
On an Elder Dempster boat,
He wears gorblimey trousers,
And a little gorblimey hat . . .

" I'll write and give her all the details. No time now. Got to get aboard. So you just give the family my love. That's what I want you to do. And see here, Nora, if you're a good girl, I might bring you back a parrot for yourself. In a cage. Or even a monkey. Tell your Ma I'll expect her to let me know how you behave."

" Suppose you forget to write, how's Ma to know where to draw her money ? "

" Oh, I'll not forget."

In the playground behind her a bell rang with insistent clamour. " I must be going," exclaimed Nora.

" So must I, kid. Come on, give us a kiss ! " He leaned towards her, thrusting his big head against the railings.

" Oh, no," Nora shrank back.

" Why not ? "

" The other girls are looking. I must go."

" What ! " declared her father, his face darkening with indignation. " Your old man's sailing away for God knows how long, and you're ashamed to give him a kiss ! Christ help me, what next ! "

" It isn't that, Dad," faltered Nora. She knew she was play-acting. She knew he would disgrace her.

And before she could draw back, he had thrust his great hairy hand through the iron bars, and seized her by the wrist. He pulled her hand through, and she expected him to twist it ; she prepared to scream to relieve the agony. But he bent over her fingers with clumsy, half burlesque gallantry, and laid three spreading wet kisses on her knuckles.

" You'll be a rare fine wench, when you grow up," he declared, releasing her.

She drew back, quivering, and as she turned to run across the asphalt towards the waiting lines of her class-mates, towards the ranks of curious eyes and whispering lips, she saw him pick up the little leather bag, tap his bowler hat harder down on his broad head, and set off with his unbearable swaggering, self-satisfied gait.

And that was the last she, or any of her family, had seen of him. He did not write, and he did not allot part of his pay to her mother. He vanished into silence, and no rumour of him reached them. Sometimes Nora believed, or hoped, that he was dead, but the conviction did not last. He would return, inconveniently, to disgrace and burden them with his improvidence, his capricious moods, and his theatrical, senseless pranks. As a weakening, but always uneasy memory, he remained with them always, a sub-

merged, never quite forgotten threat to their peace and confidence.

By now, Nora was walking across the last wet ridge of sand, ribbed by the tide in long parallel furrows. The heels of her shoes sank deep at every step, and tilted her uncomfortably backwards at the shifting point of her stride. The wind screamed past her, making an insistent sibilance in her ears, hammering icily on her temples till they ached. The long, grey rollers, rearing and tumbling and breaking ten yards out, and then seething and spreading in the shallows, reverberated with intermittent roarings between which could be heard the softer hissing undertones made by the edge of the water as it pushed a margin of dirty scum to and fro across the scarcely dried sands. The river was pausing in its outward flow, its strength suspended, soon to be overcome by the recoil of the moon-governed sea: and slowly the ships, scattered in separate foreshortenings along the rim of the horizon, were moving in towards the Bar, converging from north and south and west to skirt the shallows and unseen sandbanks and find their way in orderly procession down the channel which afforded them their ordained, secure and narrow entry to the port.

CHAPTER VI

HIGH TEA

I

"My goodness," exclaimed Mrs. McCabe the moment she heard her elder daughter's footsteps on the landing outside the sitting-room, "wherever have you been all this time?"

Nora had intended to go and lie on her bed for ten minutes. She was tired, but she turned back and pushed open the sitting-room door and looked inside.

"Why, Ma, what's all the fuss about? Ben won't expect you to spring-clean the whole place, even if he *is* coming to tea. I never known you so fussy."

"It isn't Ben. Connie's Maurice is coming to tea too, and we must make a good impression. It's the first time he's ever been inside the door. And he'll be here in half an hour. Connie says he's never late, and he get's rather cross if he's kept waiting."

"Oh, indeed!" Nora came into the room, letting the door swing-to behind her. She stood surveying her mother, who was spreading a white cloth over a rickety table already covered with worn and stained chenille. Unconsciously Nora had put her legs astraddle and set her hands akimbo on her hips, elbows squared, and the back of her wrists turned forward.

"So we've all got to be on our posh behaviour and bring out the best teapot an' all because Mister Maurice Bruno has kindly condescended to honour us with his company? I shouldn't wonder if you haven't brought a tin of salmon for his lordship!"

"I have," said Mrs. McCabe.

" And it was a home-made cake among the lot of us, and lucky to get that, when you thought only Ben was coming ? "

" Ah, well," her mother explained, " we must have a bit of a treat now and again. And Ben likes salmon too."

" So he does. And see you help him first. And if you attempt to give him any less than Maurice Bruno gets, I'll send his helping back to you for more, and shame you in your own house."

" Ah, don't stand there talking nonsense, Nora. It's the first time Mr. Bruno's paid us a visit. We must rise to the occasion. Get your coat off, there's a good girl, and lend a hand."

" And why couldn't his lordship let us know before now that he was honouring us with his company ? I suppose he sent a telegram, he being so well off ? "

" He did indeed. It's on the mantelpiece there. Do you know, Nora, my heart nearly stopped when I opened the door and there was the telegraph boy staring at me. I knew it wasn't the time for the Irish sweep, so I thought : Someone's dead ! I wondered if it might be your father, and I went all sick and silly."

" Father ! " exclaimed Nora. " No such luck. We'll never hear of him again, but he won't put us out of our misery by dying in a decent way that we'd hear of and not be ashamed."

She walked across to the fireside and picked up the telegram in disdainful fingers.

" Arrive for tea four thirty. Drive afterwards. Love. Maurice," she read aloud. " Love, no less ! Well, it cost him nothing extra to put that in," she added, carefully counting the words.

" I think it shows a very nice feeling," said Mrs.

McCabe, who by now was washing the leaves of the aspidistra plant on the bamboo stand in the window. "He must have an affectionate nature to remember to put that in a telegram. Now, Nora, do something. Connie's cutting bread and butter in the kitchen and getting the china ready. But we'll have to do out this room as well as we can before we bring the food in. Do you think Mr. Bruno will take us all for a drive in his car after tea?"

"What hopes! Haven't you seen that car of his? It'll only hold two, and a pretty tight squeeze at that. That's why he bought it, I'll bet. And I don't suppose Connie's the only girl he takes out in the beastly little thing."

"You *can* be a cat sometimes," exclaimed Mrs. McCabe. "I daresay Mr. Bruno's had his fancies, like every other young fellow. And the temptations for a boy with a car must be something terrible these days. Oh, yes, I've seen the girls looking at them. I'm not such a fool as you think. But it's my considered opinion that Mr. Bruno is serious about Connie. Otherwise he wouldn't come to tea and send a telegram."

"He seems to have invited himself," replied Nora, but she took off her coat and went to seek a brush and a dust pan.

2

She worked sulkily, full of resentment which sprang from frustration and envy. Her girlhood had been protracted, and for long after her body was mature she had gone happily about in what seemed now an emotional trance, her vanity and her desires dormant and unresponsive to the glances and jests of young men. She had been completely happy and satisfied in the

confiding, exclamatory friendship of other girls, and, although their affection was transient and almost accidental, she had never felt insecure or unvalued until her twenty-fifth year. Then Ben Satterthwaite had come, and diligently, stolidly, without an explicit word, he had made her understand that she was dear and desirable to him. She became tender, excited, grateful, but it was not until they fell into the habit of walking arm in arm, and sometimes, when the daylight had failed, stopping and standing for long minutes close together, with Ben's arms folding tight around her waist and drawing her up to his slow, shy kisses, that she discovered new desires in herself.

At first she had believed that all she wanted was to be alone with Ben occasionally, to tease him and watch his discomfort, to hold his hand as they sat side by side in the ninepenny seats at the cinema and feel his shoulder warm on hers, to be kissed and held close to him. It was as well, perhaps, that she had been so simply satisfied, because for two long years Ben had been out of work, a ship's engineer without a ship, and their engagement seemed never likely to develop into marriage. For some months now dissatisfaction had been growing in Nora. She wanted more than Ben could give: a house of her own, respite from her daily work at the Store, children, and a consummation, unknown, unformulated by her conscious mind, scarcely to be imagined, for the ardent desires that warmed so terrifyingly into life when Ben took her into his arms. Sometimes she would speak to him bitterly and despondently of the future, and then, seeing his pink square face grow almost thin with shame, she would be all tender again, and cling to him, and in the moment of her tenderness the warm desires would surge within her overpoweringly. It was then, or when she woke

uneasily in the night, that she wished most fiercely that Ben could escape from his stolid self-control, that he would cease to wait on her yes and no, and take her, and " do that." This was the only phrase with which she ever permitted herself, even in her most secret thoughts, to contemplate what she nevertheless knew to be the logical and natural goal of her desires.

She would not acknowledge these moments of weakness. She clung to her woman's integrity. If she once surrendered that, except as a lawful wife, to any man, even to Ben, she would be cheapened. Some girls said a man could read it in a girl's eyes, if she had " done that." And Sanders, in the Fancy Haby, said that a girl she met at Blackpool said that once you had " done that " it was terribly hard to refuse a man, even another man, who took your fancy. There were other things you could let a man do with his hands, she knew, without going as far as " that," and some girls said it didn't matter, it helped to keep a man interested. But Ben wasn't that sort, thank goodness. She knew he wanted more than kisses and embraces. She could see it in his eyes, which were often dark with sorrow now when he kissed her, but he would never ask. He wasn't that sort, no more than she was. She supposed they'd just have to put up with it, till better times came, and the ships started to get cargoes again, and there were jobs going for marine engineers.

She wouldn't have minded, only for having Connie in the same house, and younger than she was, and always on top of the world about her Maurice Bruno with his car and his money and his swanky friends. She wouldn't have minded that so much if her mother had been able to see that Ben, for all he had been out of work so long, was worth ten of Maurice. Her mother liked Ben all right, no doubt about that, but

Ben never took a high hand with her, he never impressed her the way Maurice Bruno did. Not that her mother had seen Maurice more than three times, and that was at the front door, for he'd always been in such a hurry to drive Connie away in his little scarlet sports car. Oh, and once, when he'd taken the whole family to the Empire and they'd sat in the front stalls, and he'd bought three programmes and a two-pound box of chocolates. Her mother had kept on saying: "Oh, Mr. Bruno, really you shouldn't!" and "Well, I must say you do things in style," until Nora could have screamed. She had sworn she would never go out again as Maurice's guest. And that was another thing. Her mother would call him *Mister* Bruno, even now. But it had never been *Mister* Satterthwaite. "If Nora calls you Ben, you won't mind if I do the same." And Ben had grinned and said it was very friendly.

Maurice was another sort of chap altogether, compared with Ben. Flashy, that's what he was. And sly too. She'd bet he'd asked Connie to let him "do that." She hoped to goodness Connie had said no. But, of course, she had. Connie wasn't a fool. She was hard, too. It wouldn't hurt her to say no. She was out for what she could get. Chocolates and cocktails and drives to Southport and Blackpool and Llandudno. Though Connie *was* a fool to take cocktails. She ought to be spoken to about that. It wasn't as if she couldn't see the effect that drink had on a woman, with Mrs. Gibson in the house. Not that Mrs. Gibson hadn't behaved herself for a long time now. No bottles coming in under her coat, and no men hanging round the place. Perhaps that meant there was another outbreak just about due. Well, if Mrs. Gibson disgraced the house this time, and particularly if she kept a man in her rooms after eleven o'clock a

night, something ought to be done about it. The landlord would have to be told, and that would be the end of Mrs. Gibson's little games.

3

Nora's reverie came to an end as she found herself dusting the stained mirror in the overmantel and saw a face she could hardly recognise as her own. She saw a young woman not looking young at all. with thinned cheeks and eyes gleaming wide and pale, and her lips twisted tight upon each other. Real horrid I look to-day, she thought. And at that, her mouth opened and she saw the face in the mirror smooth into bewilderment, and then smile at her half-heartedly.

" My hair's in an awful mess," she said aloud.

A hesitant double-knock sounded at the door.

" Don't say that's Mr. Bruno already," called Mrs. McCabe in an agitated voice from the kitchen. "There's that darn in the lace curtains showing, and you must put a cushion on the seat of that armchair. The spring's gone and the horsehair's coming out. Do it quickly, Nora, and then go to the door."

" Not me," retorted Nora. " Connie can let her own young man in."

" Pig ! " called Connie from the kitchen. " I can't go. I've got an apron on, and my hands are all greasy."

" Wash them then."

" Oh, please, Nora, and hurry or he'll go away. He's so impatient.

" Indeed I won't. If he can't wait a minute he's not much good."

" You go then, Ma," implored Connie. " Only be quick."

" All right, all right." And Mrs. McCabe flurried through the sitting-room, patting her hair and her blouse as she went, and mustering an artificial smile to her distracted face.

But when she opened the door she exclaimed with relief. " Oh, that's a mercy. It's only Ben."

" *Only* Ben ! " repeated Nora indignantly, but at once the gleam darkened out of her eyes as she smiled intimately, swiftly, tenderly, for him alone.

Ben was tall, with broad shoulders held awkwardly, and his body, though strong, seemed to jut at strange angles through his faded blue suit. His fair hair was cut short and brushed straight back from his forehead. His eyes were brown and looked almost black by contrast with the pinkness of his rough-textured skin. His red ears stood out, but his jaw was squared and well formed, and his broad mouth set to a firm shape. He stood in a tentative attitude just within the doorway.

" Were you expecting somebody else ? " he asked. " Perhaps you'd like me to go ? "

" I never heard of such a thing," declared Mrs. McCabe, hospitably. " Sit you down. Tea'll be ready in two shakes of a lamb's tail. The girls were just giving me a hand putting the place to rights. Mr. Bruno's coming, you know ! "

" Oh ! Connie's young man ? "

" Well, there's nothing official yet about it. But anyways, he's coming to tea and then he's going to take Connie out in his car. Let's see, Ben, you've never met Mr. Bruno, have you ? "

" Heard about him, that's all."

" 'Scuse me," called Nora from the fireplace. " I'm just going to tidy myself up a bit."

" And what about me ? " wailed Connie from the

kitchen. " I'm not through yet and I'm a perfect sight. I'd die if Maurice saw me like this."

" Never mind, you'll have two maids when you're married, and live in Sefton Park ! " Nora ran out of the room and upstairs.

" Look here," said Connie appearing in the doorway that led from the kitchen to the sitting-room, " I simply must go, Ma. And you're not fit to be seen yourself. It's a perfect curse," she exclaimed, turning to Ben, " living on two floors. If visitors come and you're not ready, you're cut off. Simply can't get to the bedroom. So Ma and me must fly now. Look here, you'll lend a hand, won't you ! "

Ben nodded.

" There isn't much. Bring in all those things and put them on the dresser there, and lay the table. The bread and butter and the salmon and the cake and the jelly, and the tea things. Ma'll make tea when we come down again. The forks and spoons are in that drawer. And oh, my goodness, look at that mantel-shelf ! You'll find a duster behind the door. You might give it a rub over. Sorry to bother you, but Maurice comes from a very good home and he notices things like that. You don't mind ? "

" Not a bit," murmured Ben, putting his hat on the floor under a chair and making for the kitchen.

" So long. I always said you were a good sport, Ben."

4

He found that two of the cups and saucers had to be washed again, and it was ten minutes before he had set the table. The duster was not behind the door, but he knew his way about the kitchen, and finally found it under a soiled chemise, which he thought

might be Nora's and handled with respectful sentimentality. He was just about to remove the ornaments from the mantelshelf when three loud knocks sounded on the door. Ben put down the duster, took a careful look round the room, and then stepped across and opened the door.

A small dapper young man in a plus-fours suit of checked brown stood there.

"I thought this was where Miss McCabe lived," said the stranger. "Have I made a mistake?"

"She lives here all right, but I expect it's Connie you want to see. Come right in."

"I'm Mr. Bruno, Mr. Maurice Bruno," announced the newcomer, standing in the middle of the room and stroking the oily waves of his glistening hair into place with white voluptuous fingers. He had a thin nose, so thin that the ridge of it ran white down the middle of his sallow face, and behind his horn-rimmed spectacles his glance darted swiftly here and there, noting and appraising, but ever returning, unabashed and inquisitive, to peer at Ben. His tweed coat was cut very narrow from padded shoulders into his waist, and his stockings were knitted in a scarlet and green diamond pattern.

"Been playing golf?" inquired Ben, with as much politeness as he could muster while he gave his chief attention to removing a china clock, four vases, a conch and a velvet-framed photograph from the mantelshelf and placing them gingerly on the floor.

"Not to-day." Bruno had turned completely and slowly round in his appraisal of the room and its contents. "Just finished a deal at the office. I'm in insurance. Marine insurance. Not doing too badly, considering the times."

He walked across to the sofa, made to sit down,

changed his mind, walked absently towards the kitchen door, peeped in, and finally returned to the sofa where he sat back comfortably and surveyed Ben, who was now wiping the mantelshelf with vigorous sweeps of the duster which made the wooden overmantel quiver and creak at every motion of his arm.

" Family upstairs, doing up their back hair ? "

" That's about it," said Ben.

" And you're giving a hand with the housework, eh ? "

Ben picked up the clock and, holding it tight in his left hand, began to rub the duster as well as he could into its gilded convolutions. " Yes. You've come a bit early, you see," he explained.

Bruno laughed and showed a gold tooth. " My telegram caught 'em out, did it ? And let's see, you'll be Nora's fiancé ? Forgotten your name, though I have been told."

" Satterthwaite."

" Course ! I remember now. Mercantile marine, aren't you ? Why, we're almost in the same line o' business. Though I don't suppose you find it as easy to pick up the spondulicks as I do. Needs brains to build up an insurance connection. No offence meant."

" That's all right," said Ben, replacing the clock as near to the middle of the mantelshelf as he could gauge.

" Hope my car's all right ? " Maurice Bruno got up and, lifting the window, peered down into the street. Then, raising his voice : " Hi ! Clear out, you young devil, or I'll come down and wring your neck."

Pulling down the window again, " Absolute menace, kids are, if you've got a smart car," he observed. " And I don't suppose they often see one like mine in this neighbourhood. Supercharged sports model. You run a bus ? "

" No such luck."

" Well, cheer up, times'll change."

" So you've come," said Nora, entering the room. " Sorry we weren't quite ready for you. Connie'll be down in a minute."

" Ah," Bruno observed to Ben, " it's real flattering, the time and trouble a girl'll spend on her complexion when a young man comes to see her."

But Nora had uttered a cry of astonishment. " What are you doing with that duster, Ben ? Do you mean to tell me Connie had the cheek to make you finish tidying up ? "

" She didn't make me," said Ben. " And why shouldn't I ? I like to help."

" You can help *me* if you like," declared Nora with vehemence. " But I'll have Connie know you're not here to run round after her and her—her——" Politeness forbade her to apply to Bruno in his presence the epithet that was in her mind.

" So you set the table, did you ? " she continued. " And I'll take my oath Mr. Maurice Bruno didn't offer to lift a finger to help you. He wouldn't soil his hands. Not he ! "

" I'd practically finished before he came," protested Ben.

" That's right," put in Bruno. " And anyhow I never let on to be what you might call a handyman. It's up there I've got it." He tapped his forehead significantly, with pride.

5

Mrs. McCabe and Connie came into the room. Connie had changed into a flared grey skirt and an embroidered blouse with puff sleeves which ended above her elbows. Her hair shone with brilliantine, her nails were

polished scarlet, and her mouth looked not only broader but fuller for the lipstick she had applied.

" Well, Mr. Bruno," said Mrs. McCabe, " this is a pleasure, I'm sure. You'll pardon Connie and me for being a bit late, but I expect you and Ben here have been making friends."

" Well, we've got something in common," said Bruno. " We both make a living out of the sea, one way or another."

" But I thought you was in insurance, Mr. Bruno ? "

" Marine insurance, Mrs. McCabe. I arrange policies on freight—cargoes, you know."

" I see," said Mrs. McCabe vaguely. Then, her face brightening : " That might be useful to you, Ben. Mr. Bruno is sure to meet some important people. You take my advice and make friends with him. He might be able to put you in the way of finding a ship, and then you and Nora could get married. Though it'll be a bitter day for me when both my girls leave me and settle down."

" Out of a job ? " Bruno inquired.

" Yes," said Ben.

" There's a lot like that."

" Seems to me," put in Nora, " it's only crooks and dressed-up dolls can make a living nowadays."

" And what do you mean by that ? " demanded Connie. " Are you trying to make any nasty insinuations, Nora McCabe ? "

" Gracious me, no," declared Mrs. McCabe. " What an idea, Connie ! Nora didn't mean anything." Turning to Bruno, she explained with bland tactfulness : " Nora and Ben have been waiting a long time to get married, and I always think long engagements are very trying, don't you ? "

For the first time Maurice Bruno's confidence showed

a momentary insecurity. " Oh, I don't know. Better to be quite sure before you commit yourself. That's what I always say."

" What about tea," Connie demanded, " if Maurice and me are going to get away ? "

" I'll put the kettle on at once. Excuse me, Mr. Bruno." And Mrs. McCabe retired to the kitchen.

Connie looked inquiringly at Maurice Bruno. " Going to let me sit next you on the sofa ? "

" What's the matter with my knee ? Your sister won't be shocked, will she ? "

" You never know about Nora. Anyhow, you'll only get conceited if I do. So move up and make room for me. Not quite so close either. Remember we're in my home now, not in your car."

" Ah ha ! But later on this evening we shall be."

" Well, you can behave yourself till then," said Connie primly, but rolling her eyes at Ben and Nora to see what effect this adventurous conversation had on them.

" Now, Mr. Bruno," announced Mrs. McCabe when she had installed the teapot under its cosy, " are you sure you're comfortable on that sofa ? It's a bit low, isn't it, to sit at table ? Just say the word and Ben'll change places with you."

" You might ask Ben first," put in Nora.

" Indeed I don't need to. Ben's always willing to do anything for me."

" I'll stay where I am and cause no trouble," declared Bruno.

" I think you might call him Maurice," Connie suggested.

" Well, if he doesn't mind ? "

" Delighted. But I think I'll miss the fish course. I've got the sort o' finicky stomach that can't stand salmon unless it's fresh."

This produced a heavy silence on the others, who were not accustomed to meals divided into courses and knew that there was nothing to follow the salmon. At last Mrs. McCabe roused herself to inquire anxiously : " Oh, Mr. Bruno—I mean, Maurice—you can't go out hungry. Won't you let me boil you an egg ? Two eggs ? "

" I'll do very well with bread and butter and cake. And Connie, you needn't bother with the salmon either. I thought we might stop at a hotel and get a bite of supper about nine o'clock."

" Reely ! " Connie flashed a triumphant eye at her mother and Nora. " In that case, I don't think I will."

" And where," asked Bruno, " is that young brother you were telling me about, who's doing so well at school ? "

This was Mrs. McCabe's favourite subject of conversation and she did not give Connie an opportunity to answer. " Now what a pity we didn't know you was coming to tea sooner," she cried. " My son's been playing football for his school this afternoon, and he's going to stay the night with one of his school friends. He's been playing in the second team, and he's not fifteen yet."

" Nice situation you got here," remarked Bruno, who wanted to hear no more about George Alexander, " looking out on the sea almost. Finished ? " he asked Ben. " Have a cigar ? I'm sure the ladies won't mind if we smoke. And perhaps Connie had better be powdering her nose if we're going to get anywhere to-night."

Connie laughed and flounced away. Ben was too astounded to refuse the cigar which Bruno produced from his waistcoat pocket, revealing at the same time two fat green fountain pens side by side. Nora was gratified to see Ben make quite a deft job of removing the band, cutting away the end and starting an even,

scarlet glow : but Ben smoked with only an appearance of enjoyment. He knew from Nora's scowl that she had wanted him to decline.

" And by the way," said Bruno, who was now standing in front of the mirror in the overmantel and arranging his hair with a comb he had taken from another waistcoat pocket, " I've got a couple of tickets for the Scala to-night. First showing of *Grand Hotel.* You know, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, John Barrymore, Wallace Beery and all. I shan't be wanting them. I thought you might like to go, Nora, along with Ben."

" Thank you, but I'd rather not."

" Don't be silly. There they are." He threw the pieces of coloured paper on to the table.

" I don't want them," said Nora.

" Nora," exclaimed her mother, " you're a thoroughly ungrateful girl. It's very kind of Maurice to think of you and Ben. Don't you worry, Maurice. I'll see they're made use of."

" 'S all the same to me. Right, Connie? Then it's time we stepped on the gas. So long, folks. Don't worry about your little girl to-night, Mrs. McCabe. I'll bring her back safe and sound. Bit late perhaps, so don't wait up for her."

" And that," said Nora, as the door closed, " is good shuttance to bad rubbish."

CHAPTER VII

HOMECOMING

I

" Now," said Mrs. McCabe, " you'll leave me to do the washing up, and you and Ben'll go to see that film. First time it's been shown outside London. Wish I could go myself."

" You can for all I care," Nora retorted. " Catch me taking tickets from a tailor's dummy like that. He might 'a been the Lord Mayor distributing cocoa and buns at a charity school, the way he flung them on the table. Fair gave me the sicks, he did. Anyhow, Connie never had any taste."

" When you've lived as long as I have, Nora McCabe," observed her mother in a sibylline voice, " you'll learn to be thankful for small mercies. Mr. Bruno . . ."

" Thought you were going to call him Maurice ? "

" Maurice, then. What I was going to say was, he don't mean anything rude by the way he goes on. Every man that's got a career in front of him, as they say, talks like that. They got to do it, or else they'd never make money. Isn't that so, Ben ? "

" There's something in what you say," the fair young man admitted. " Can't say he's my sort, exactly, but there's no sense in wasting good tickets."

" There ! " exclaimed Mrs. McCabe in triumph. " Now be off with you."

" The trouble with you," Nora told Ben, " is that you've got no proper pride."

" Anyhow," declared Ben, " we've got time to do the washing up before we start. Lots of time. The tickets

are for the last house. Let me empty that bucket of rubbish into the bin."

"But it's downstairs."

"All right," said Ben, his whole face brightening as he made a joke. "I'm first-class at walking downstairs."

He picked up the bucket and was soon on the dark landing below. The next flight of stairs was faintly illumined by a small window set high in the wall, and, as he prepared to descend, a tall woman, with brilliant eyes in a haggard but strikingly handsome face, pushed past him.

"Evening, Mrs. Gibson," he murmured, but received no reply. Glancing up at the first turn of the stair, he saw her striving to insert a key with fumbling, hasty fingers, and holding tight a brown paper parcel under one arm.

Going on the booze again, he thought, and wondered whether he should communicate the news to the McCabes. He decided to say nothing: after all, he might have been mistaken about the shape of the parcel, and anyhow it was none of his business.

The dustbin was kept in a small yard at the back of the house, and Ben soon uncovered it, tipped the contents of the bucket in, and replaced the lid. He strolled round to the front entrance and stood for a moment gazing at the blue darkness of night over the estuary, framed between the silhouetted houses at the end of the street. It was more than two years since he had seen the shore now in front of him from the deck of a ship. He did not specially like the sea, which was monotonous except when it was untrustworthy, but he missed the great oily, reverberating engines, he missed the daily compulsion of a job to be maintained and the support it afforded to his self-respect.

He became aware that a man was standing opposite

him and speaking, a short elderly man with a seaman's kitbag dropped on the pavement at his feet.

" 'Scuse me, mate, but does Mrs. McCabe live round here ? "

" Yes."

" Thank ye kindly. And whereabouts exactly may I ask ? "

" Up here on the second floor. I'm going up myself. Do you want to see her ? "

" I might as well, seein' I'm here. I'll come up with you." And the man slung the kitbag over his shoulder.

" You a friend o' theirs ? " he asked as they passed Mrs. Gibson's closed door.

Ben did not answer. He had guessed that this was Nora's father.

Arrived on the second-floor landing, " You'd better wait here a minute," he declared, " and I'll tell Mrs. McCabe you've come."

But Peter McCabe only smiled and walked in before Ben could shut the door.

A plate slid from Mrs. McCabe's wet fingers and broke with a clatter on the floor into two halves.

" Oh, Ma, what are you doing ! " cried Nora. Then she too turned, and saw her father.

" Sorry I couldn't let you know I was coming, but the ship only docked this afternoon." He slid the kitbag to the floor and stood surveying the sitting-room. " Nice place you got here. Better'n Great Homer Street. More quiet. Fresher too. Well, Nora, I shouldn't 'a known you but for your black hair. Go away and leave a bit of a girl : come back and find a woman, eh ? What's the matter ? Have you forgotten your Dad ? "

" No, I've not forgotten."

Ben looked at her, and then at Mrs. McCabe, wondering what they wanted him to do. He was ready to throw this stumpy, jeering little man out of the house if that was what they wanted, but he could read nothing in their eyes except shock and bewilderment. He stood watchfully behind Peter McCabe, his pink serious face staring over the top of the bowler hat with its old-fashioned curly brim which slanted so queerly over the round broad head.

" Is that a boil you've got on your face ? " Mrs. McCabe said at last.

" Oh no, that's just a foreign decoration. I put it on specially to please you."

His wife ignored the sarcasm. " I knew you'd come back. I knew it." She spoke tonelessly, as if to herself.

The little man threw up a hand, shoulder high, with fluttering fingers, a bravura gesture of insincerity which made Nora shudder with uneasy recollection. " Why, surely you never thought I'd desert my own wife and childer ? "

The colour was coming back to Nora's cheeks now.

" Of course not," she challenged his bluff. " You just forgot to write and give us your address. You just forgot to make an allotment to Ma. You just forgot for fourteen years."

" It isn't as long as that," protested her father.

" It is," said Mrs. McCabe. " Getting on for fifteen."

" Wonderful how time flies ! Honest to God, I never thought it was that long. I been through a lot. Hardships you'd never dream on. I've had a pile o' bad luck, I have. But never mind that now. I'll tell you all about it another day. Plenty o' time before I sail."

" You're going away again ? " Nora took the inference sharply.

" You bet I am. Soon as I can get another ship. *And*

that won't be long. Glad to get out o' the hooker I came on. The Chief—well, I told him off good and proper soon as we'd tied up here. Led me the life of a dog, he did, ever since we left Santos. A proper bastard! Beg your pardon, m' dear. But he was. If I hadn't resigned my post I might 'a done him an injury. I'm easy-going, I am, as you well know, but when I'm roused it don't do for no Presbyterian bible-puncher to cross my path."

"Well," observed Nora, "thank God you're sober now."

Her father turned with a swift, truculent squaring of his elbows and shoulders. "Look here, my girl, you may think you're grown up, but I'll have you know I'm still your Dad, and you'll treat me respectful. I daresay your Ma's been poisonin' your mind against me?"

"No, she hasn't."

"Don't you answer back. Too much lip altogether."

"You better leave Nora alone," said Ben.

Peter McCabe started and spun round. "Christ! I'd forgotten you. Who might you be? And what are you doing in my house?"

Nora sneered. "*Your* house!"

"Yes, my house. What's my wife's my own. If I choose to claim it."

"Not now," said Ben. "The law's been altered."

"And who are you anyway? Answer me that."

"For your information," explained Nora, "this is my Ben. Ben Satterthwaite."

"Oh, married, eh?"

"Not yet?"

"I see. Just walking out. Well, young feller-me-lad, that don't give you no right to interfere between a father and his daughter. However, I didn't come home to make a row. I just want to be treated respectful and friendly.

Aren't you goin' to ask me to sit down and have something to eat ? "

" I suppose you might as well," sighed Mrs. McCabe. " I was just clearing the table. Put the kettle on, Nora."

" Is that salmon, there ? Fine. Fancy you remember-in' my likes so well. I always say there's nothing quite so tasty as a bit o' salmon with your tea. Sit down, young feller. Yes, you, Ben. That's your name, isn't it ? You an' me'll have to have a serious talk by and by, if you want to marry my daughter. You'll have to tell me all about your prospects, you know. By the way, what *is* your job ? "

" Ben's a ship's engineer. He'll be taking his Chief's ticket soon," explained Mrs. McCabe.

" Is that so ? " Two fork loads of salmon disappeared into the broad mouth. " Tea goin' to be long, Ma? Well, Ben, I'm a greaser. One of them poor, sweaty, hard-working devils that blokes like you chivvy about the engine-room. Sure it won't affect your what-d'ye-call-it, your professional standing, to get married to a greaser's daughter ? "

Ben shook his head.

" We'd better not sign on in the same ship, though, had we ? 'Cause I couldn't have you handing me out jobs and passing remarks on my handiwork, now could I ? I ask you, as man to man, it wouldn't do, would it ? And I don't suppose you want your colleagues—is that the word ?—to know you had a father-in-law sleeping in the fo'c's'le, would you ? Not bloody likely. I apologise for the language, Ma. It slipped out. You see, Ben an' me's just a couple o' seagoin' blokes having a chat together. By the way, Ben, what's the ship you're sailing in just now?"

" I'm on the shore at present."

Peter McCabe whistled, and then picked his teeth.

" I never can make out why they don't take the blasted bones out o' salmon when they put it in the tins. Been on the shore long ? "

" Quite a bit."

" Not expecting a Chief's job, are you ? "

" I'd sign on as a seventh or eighth if I got the chance. Though last time I sailed as third on a Lamport and Holt boat that carried six engineers."

" Why don't you sink your pride and turn to as a greaser, till things get better ? I daresay now I could get you fixed up. You'd find it pretty hard going, at first. And you'd find it's one thing to give orders and another to carry them out. Why, strike me, I'll bet I know more about turbine engines than any certified engineer that was ever pupped. If I'd only had the education, I'd be Chief in a White Star boat by now. Only, I never had a chance. I had to turn to and earn my own living when I was thirteen. No apprenticeship or theory-work for me. Not that I reckon theory's anything but eye-wash. When there's a real breakdown, where would all your educated engineers be if they hadn't practical men like me to turn to for advice ? And what thanks do we get ? I remember once, in the old *Bandalore*, we had the engine-room running with water and rising steadily. The engineer on the watch was a young chap, and when he found the bilge pumps wouldn't act, he damn near lost his head. Yellow and blue with funk he was. Thought the ship was going to go down. He only knew the theory, y'see. But lucky for him there was a practical man on the watch. You're right. It was me. And what d'ye think I made him do ? I made him use the bilge injection. He'd never have thought of that in a month of Sundays. Nor would you, I dare say. But it cleared that water double quick. You don't get knowledge like that out o' books."

" Ben an' Nora's got tickets for the pictures to-night," put in Mrs. McCabe. " And I think they ought to be stepping along."

" Oh, the pictures, eh ? Well, I'm no spoil-sport. Off you go, Ben."

" There's no hurry," said Ben. " Plenty of time yet for the last house."

" I'm not going."

" Don't be silly, Nora. I thought we'd settled all that. There's no sense in being proud because the tickets was given you by Maurice. Cutting off your nose to spite your face."

" It's not that. I'm not going to leave you alone here."

" Your Ma won't be alone. I'll be with her."

" That's exactly what I mean."

" Are you trying to be rude again, my girl ? "

" If you like to take it that way."

For several seconds the eyes under the tufted red brows glared into the scornful blue eyes of the defiant girl, and then the man gave way. He turned to his wife.

" Who's this Maurice ? Is he the kid in the fancy clothes I saw drivin' Connie off in a car ? Oh, he is, is he ? I thought that must be Connie. She's grown proper pretty. Does us both credit. Still got her old man's red hair. But I'll tell you what, I didn't much like the way she'd painted her face. I can't have no daughter o' mine going round looking like a hussy. And what's she doing letting young fellers drive her about in cars ? Or is this Maurice going to marry her ? "

" We don't know exactly yet."

" Well, why don't you ? Seems to me it's a mother's business to know that. Just the way girls lose their character, driving out on dark roads with young good-for-nothings."

" Maurice isn't a good-for-nothing. He makes a lot of money in insurance. Marine insurance, too."

" All the more reason why Connie shouldn't go out with him till there's a regular understanding. I'd better see this young Maurice when he comes back with her. What time do you expect them, anyway ? "

" They won't be very late."

" You needn't worry about Connie," Nora intervened. " She's well able to look after herself."

" That's all you know. No girl's able to look after herself if she's as pretty as Connie is. It's easy to see this home has been goin' to rack and ruin for lack of a father's care."

Nora's laugh was harsh and abrupt. " That's good, that is!"

Her father's mouth tightened into a pale twisted line across his darkening face.

" Here, you get out," he cried. " Get along to the pictures with your young man before I lose my temper. You've forgotten what I'm like when I'm roused."

" No, I haven't. That's why I'm going to stay with Ma. And Ben'll stay, too. Won't you, Ben ? "

" Of course I will, if you want me."

3

Peter McCabe got up from the tea-table, pulled a short pipe from his pocket, knocked it out into the fire-place, and then turned with a calm and ingratiating face.

" Suppose we all sit down and talk this over," he suggested. " Seems to me you're takin' me all the wrong way."

Half reclining on the sofa, he faced them all, sitting in a half-circle round him, Nora bolt upright, her mother drooping, Ben leaning back, his chair tilted, one hand on the top of Nora's chair to lend her assurance.

" You got it up against me for being away so long ? Well, I never was no letter writer. But don't think I'd forgotten you. Time and again, I collected a bit o' money to send along, but I've had cruel bad luck. I've been on the shore, too, Ben, and not in cushy spots like the Pool. St. Johns, and Valparaiso, and Bushire in the Gulf. I been robbed, too, more than once. I been put in prison, in Chile that was, and no fault of mine. There's no law worth talking of in them parts. But all the time I been trying to work my way back, and find a nice quiet ship puttin' into the Pool regular. Only circumstances has been against me, till this last trip."

" Sure, you've had all the hard times. It's just been easy for Ma bringing up your kids on memories and promises."

" You're hard, Nora, that's what you are ! But I'm not going to make excuses. I know what I been through. I can judge myself. No one else can. What I'm trying to tell you is, you won't have to put up with me for long. Maybe I'm not cut out for a husband and father. I'm not tame enough. And now you and Connie's grown up and able to earn a living, maybe you don't need me so much. I was born under a wanderin' star, that's what the matter with me. I can't settle down. So there's no need for you to get it into your head that I've come to stay. This is just a friendly little visit, brief and bright, till I get another ship. Then away we go and maybe you don't see me again for years and years and years. I reckon that'll suit the lot on us. Meanwhile, can't we let bygones be bygones and all enjoy ourselves together while it lasts ? "

He ended the silence that followed with a laugh. " I'm not broke, you know. Plenty o' back pay to get through." The pocket-book in his fingers gaped open showing folded treasury notes.

" We don't want your money," declared Nora.

" I on'y wanted to show you I'm not a pauper, begging charity. Let's put it this way—I'll be a payin' guest for a week, maybe less. Pay for my own board and lodgings. That's fair, isn't it ? "

" And when the money's spent, you'll still be on our hands. Ma'll be far too soft to turn you out."

" Nora," said Mrs. McCabe, " I've let you manage this so far, but it's my affair really. You see, Peter, it's not easy for me, you turning up sudden after all these years. I don't know what to do or say. Sometimes we've thought you must be dead."

" And wished I was, eh ? Well, don't worry. You'll hear soon enough when I snuff it. I got your name down as next of kin in my pay book, and I'll put in the new address now. But never mind that. I'm not dead yet by a long way. It's a do, then, is it ? We're all friends so long as I don't overstay my welcome ? "

" I suppose so." Mrs. McCabe's consent was heavy with weariness.

" Give us a kiss then, for auld lang syne."

She shuddered as his wet lips fell on her cheek, and he patted her shoulder and, said, " Forgotten what it's like to have a husband, eh ? "

He began to wander restlessly round the room.

" You've collected quite a lot o' new things, haven't you ? It's a nice, comfy little home, there's no denyin' that. But I'm glad you kept that armchair. That's the one your Aunt Kate gave us, if I remember right, when we was married. She was a funny old bitch, she was. Don't think she ever liked me, somehow. Same old clock, too. The sideboard's not lookin' what it was, though. Still, we had good wear out of it."

He opened a drawer and turned over its contents in an abstracted manner, until suddenly he uttered a cry

of surprise and pleasure. " My old baccy box, so help me ! And my razor case. *And* the razor in it, too. Well, you are a sentimental old girl to keep 'em all this time. I always said you had a kind heart, in spite o' your face. I never had a razor like this one. Never meant to leave it behind. Still got an edge of sorts. I'll get it set and ground to-morrow. My luck's right in." He slipped the metal tobacco-box into a side pocket and dropped the razor in its case inside his coat, next the pocket-book.

" Tell you what, missus, I'm tired. I'll go up and have a lie down on our bed. Then we'll walk round to the pub and have a drink to celebrate the happy reunion, before we turn in. How does that programme suit you ? "

Mrs. McCabe stared at him.

But Nora cried, her voice dry and crackling in her throat, " You don't think you're going to sleep with her ? "

" Nora, you mustn't say such things."

" What's it got to do with you ? " her father demanded.

" Mother ! You couldn't, you couldn't ! "

" And why not ? " Her father's manner wavered between joviality and truculence. " Anyways, I should 'a thought a girl like you'd be ashamed even to think of such things. You go along to the pictures and hold your young man's hand and leave your Ma and me to manage our own affairs."

Secret shames and inarticulate terrors set Nora's fingers quivering, and her face mantled with hot blood till she almost reeled from faintness. An irrelevant thought dazzled across her mind like remote lightning—" *I'll never be able to look Ben in the face after this !* "—and then left her in the darkness of her emotions, shouting aloud, without awareness of what she was saying,

" You won't ! I won't let you ! Do you take my Ma for Mrs. Gibson ? She's forgotten you ! You're nothing to her ! You're not even to touch her, you beastly swine ! "

" Swine, am I ? " shouted her father. " Is this the sort of daughter I have—an unnatural bitch ? Call your father a swine, would you ? I'll knock hell out of you for that."

His hand closed round Nora's arm, he pulled her round to face him, for in her shame she had spoken over her shoulder.

" Stop it ! " cried Mrs. McCabe, in tears.

But Ben, bewildered by all these intimacies and false seemings, had with relief seen his opportunity to do something. He was far taller than Peter McCabe and his blow sent the older man staggering backwards.

" Leave Nora alone," he said.

" Take her to hell out of this."

" No, no," cried Nora. " Don't leave him with Ma. Can't you see she's afraid of him, she hates him ? There, Ma, never mind. Don't cry. Ben'll put him out."

" If Ben lays hands on me again, it'll be the worse for him. I've drawn blood from bigger men and better men. But don't you worry ! I'm not going to stay where I'm not wanted. I thought you was going to be friendly. It's Nora who causes the trouble. She always was a hard case. You tell me with your own lips you want me to go and I'll go."

Mrs. McCabe said nothing. She stood with her back to them all, her shoulders quivering, her head bent.

" Go on, tell him, Ma."

" You shut your trap. I'm dealing with your mother not with you."

" Nora, you can't ask me to turn your own father out ? I couldn't."

" But you don't want him to . . . to . . . ? "

" Perhaps he could sleep on the sofa ? "

Peter McCabe threw his arms into the air. " The sofa ! My own wife offers me the sofa ! Did you ever hear the like of that ? So this is what I've come home to, after all these years ! A wife with a heart of stone and a brazen-faced daughter no better than she ought to be ! And my other child out in the night with some jackanapes in a fancy car ! Is that your last word to me, then ? The sofa ! The sofa, no less, the mouldy old sofa for your husband that's worn himself out on the seven seas of the world ! All right ! I'm well rid of the lot of yez. It's a God-forsaken, cold-hearted hole you've made out of the good home I gave you, and I'd rather die than stay in it. Where's my kit-bag ? I'm off, and you'll never set eyes on me again, not one of yez. And if there's any justice in the world, my curse'll blast the light out of your eyes."

The door crashed in its warped frame behind him.

4

Mrs. Gibson had just put her youngest child to bed, and was stripping the seal from the black bottle in her parlour, when she heard a series of clattering noises and muttered ejaculations on the landing outside.

She moved quickly and opened the door. A sturdy man, no longer young, but with bushy red brows and glittering eyes, blinked at her in the light from the open door. She smiled and patted her yellow, fluffy hair.

" Thank you, ma'am," he said. " It was as dark as the pit without the light from your room."

" That's a heavy-looking bag you've got there. You're a sailor, aren't you ? "

" Jolly Jack, that's me. Though my right name's Peter."

" I used to know a Peter once. A nice chap."

" I'm a nice chap, too."

She laughed. " I'll have to take your word for that."

His glance found the two bottles on the table, and then stole to her face.

" It isn't right, is it, for a lady to be drinking all on her lonesome ? " she said.

" That's soon put right." He swung the heavy kit-bag inside the door, and pulled it to behind him.

" You've spoken the first kindly word I've heard to-day. Well, here's to you."

" And here's to you."

She wiped her mouth and giggled.

5

On the floor below, Nora had locked the door behind her father.

" In case he changes his mind," she announced. " Though I don't think he will."

They looked at each other, Nora, her mother and Ben, and then looked away again, embarrassed.

" I'm awfully sorry, Ben," Mrs. McCabe murmured at last. " I wouldn't have had this happen, with you here, not for worlds. I feel so ashamed."

" Thank God Ben *was* here."

" Nora, don't you feel the least tiny bit as if he was your father ? "

" No, Ma, I do not. I'd almost forgotten him. We were all so happy. And now he's back in Liverpool. I shall be terrified of meeting him in the street, or coming home and finding him here. Ma, you've got to be firm about this. If you're soft with him, if you let him get round you, he'll plant himself on us for good an' all. You've got to be sensible, for my sake, and Connie's and George Alexander's, as well as your own."

" That's right," said Ben. " If he finds he can't get money or food or lodgings out of you, he'll clear off again quick enough."

" I'm only thankful you sent George Alexander away, Ma. The boy's so sensitive and proud. If he was to find out he has a father like that, he'd never get over the shock of it."

" Doesn't George Alexander know about him ? "

" No, he was born after his father cleared out last time," Nora explained.

" What beats me," said Ben, " is why you haven't got a separation long ago."

" Ma's never known his address. And there didn't seem to be any use in it so long as he stayed away."

" Well, if he gives any trouble now, I'm sure you could get a separation order easy enough."

" I don't want to go into a police court," said Mrs. McCabe, " and tell all my private affairs."

" Now, Ma, don't give way. Maybe there won't be any need for that."

" I'm sorry I'm being such a nuisance. My goodness, look at the time ! Now you and Ben mustn't waste those tickets. If there's one thing I hate, it's waste. I only hope I haven't spoiled your evening."

" Do you really think I'm going to march out of here and leave you here alone, with that man hanging about as likely as not ? "

" I've got an idea," announced Ben. " You go along with your Ma to the pictures, Nora. It'll do you both a world of good. Take your mind off things."

" I wouldn't dream of it. What does an old woman like me want with outings ? "

" But what'll you do, Ben ? You're a dear to think of it. Only, we can't leave you flat. Suppose we all stay here a bit ? "

" No," said Ben, " I'm going down to the docks. I'll have a mooch round to see what ships have come in to-day, and maybe I'll be able to find out something about that old man of yours. He may be bluffing us about signing off his ship. As like as not he's due to sail on the next tide and he was only trying to put the wind up you. Anyhow, I ought to have a look round the docks on the off-chance."

" Oh, you're only saying that, Ben," Mrs. McCabe protested, but half-heartedly.

Nora went over and kissed him. " Come on, Ma, put your hat on. Ben's right. A good film'll help to take the taste of that man away."

When they had turned out the gas and shut the windows and locked the doors on both floors, Mrs. McCabe suddenly gripped Nora's arm.

" Suppose he's waiting about outside ? "

" Not him. He's in a pub by now."

" I'll go down," said Ben, " and have a scout round. You wait here."

When the clatter of his footsteps died away, silence crept up stealthily and folded round them. Nora could hear a board creaking somewhere in the house, and softer than the nervous tapping of her mother's feet on the floorboards, the thin crescendoes of the wind wandering round the chimney pots and the tiles. Then, from below, there rose a sudden clangour of notes struck on a piano, and a woman's voice, shrill and piercing, sustaining a maudlin melody. Nora saw her mother's eyes gleam at her significantly out of the darkness of the landing.

You called me Baby Doll a year ago,
Year ago ! Year ago !
You said that I was very nice to know . . .

The words could hardly be distinguished, but Nora and her mother knew them well enough.

" Mrs. Gibson again ! " Nora exclaimed.

" Poor woman, poor woman ! " said Mrs. McCabe.

Ben's footsteps sounded again on the uncarpeted stairs.

" Not a sign of him ! " he whispered upwards, and, one behind the other, they tiptoed down past Mrs. Gibson's front door and out into the street.

CHAPTER VIII

MONOLOGUE

I

" Ah, there's nothing like the good old songs. Did d'ye ever hear Gertie Gitana singing ' Nellie Dean ' at the old Empire ? Not but what you haven't got a fine voice, m'dear. Remarkable voice. You're a remarkable woman altogether, and this is remarkable fine whisky. Here we go, as the Yanks say. Ay, many's the time I've seen Gertie Gitana bring the house down at the Empire with that song. They tell me they've rebuilt the place now, and made it look like a cinema. A pity. Used to be homely. Soon as I got off that ship with my duds, I went into a boozer I knew in the old days, down on the Dock Road, under the arches—d'ye know that one ? Another good tune, that is. Nothing jazzy about it. Jazz gives me a pain in the guts. Beg pardon, ma'am. Well, underneath the arches of the Overhead Railway, there's a pub I used to go to pretty regular once on a time, and as soon as I got my foot on shore, I says to myself, I says, ' You're back in the old Pool again. Suppose you push along and see old Harry Hogan ? '

So away I goes, and into the four ale bar, and asks for Harry, and strike me if the barman didn't say he'd never heard of him. That was a slap in the face for me, I don't mind admitting. Mind you, it's fourteen years since I last set eyes on the Crosby Light, so perhaps I oughtn't to ha' expected anything different. 'Look here, my lad,' I says to the barman, 'you go an' ask your boss what's becc me of Harry Hogan.' And he come back an' told me Harry'd been dead this ten year. I was just havin' a pint quiet by myself, and thinking of Harry respectful, when I heard a feller, a seaman like I am, saying he'd like to see a fight and what was the best way to the Stadium? I put my oar in at that, for I used to scrap a bit myself when I was younger, and many's the night I spent at the Stadium, so I starts off to tell him the way to Pudsey Street, you know, striking up to Scotland Road, and bearing up William Brown Street past St. George's Hall and first on the right up London Road. That's correct, isn't it? Thought I hadn't forgot. But the barman chips in, cocky as you please, and says, says he, 'Your information's out o' date!' And from what he made out I reckon there's a new Stadium somewhere behind the Cotton Exchange. I'll have to look it up. But I can't help feeling Pudsey Street was the right place to enjoy yourself.

"I've had some good times in Liverpool. And in the One-Eyed City, too, for the matter o' that. Ever been in the Argyle? Don't tell me that's gone? Well, I'm glad to hear it. Here's to the old Argyle! Best little music-hall in the world, I always maintain. Better'n anything in New York—Noo Yark, they calls it over there. Funny the way them Yanks can't speak English. Can't teach 'em either. Me an' my missus used to go over to Birkenhead to the old Argyle regular every Saturday night when we was courting. Up in the gallery.

I had a shore job then, runnin' a donkey engine at the Huskisson Dock. Meant to settle down when I got married an' be a good little boy. Me! Jesus, I could laugh when I think of it now. Me! I must 'a spent nine-tenths o' my life aboard ship, in the stokehold or the engine room. There's not many parts o' the world I've not touched at. Yes, it's a man's life I've led. It's no work for weaklings, firing boilers day in and day out for thirty-three years. Though it's a hell of a time since I touched a shovel or a slice. Greasing's better'n that. More skilled labour, that's what it is, though you need your strength at times, too.

" I been valued and looked up to on every ship I sailed in, till this last one, the bloody *Benediction*. Sorry for the language, m' dear, but that old hooker near broke my heart. If ever I meet that Chief again I'll make him sorry he was ever born. Stinking swine! Had his knife into me from the first watch I did on that boat. One o' the interferin' sort. Why, another Chief you'd never see from one end of a trip to the other. But this long-nosed Scotch bag o' dirt, he'd be up and down the ladders and round the engine-rooms ten times a day. Middle o' the night, too, when it wasn't even his watch. Not that he need 'a kept a watch! He'd be nosing around, wantin' this done over again, and that put right, which none o' the other engineers'd have bothered their heads about. And always listening to what a chap was saying. Used to go round with rubber soles on his boots. A proper creepin' Jesus. An' then he never had the guts to say straight out what he was thinking till we docked. And blast me, even then he had to get the Old Man to do his dirty work for him. So help me, if I'd only had him alone for a couple o' minutes, I'd have made a proper bleedin' mess of his face, so I would. He wouldn't 'a looked so sancti-bloody-monious after I'd finished

with him. It's stinkers like that makes a seaman wonder if his life's worth living. All right, thank ye kindly, I will. It's good stuff, this is, better'n any o' that bootleg liquor they stick you for in the States. After all, there's no place like home. Your very good health, ma'am."

2

"Not that I got a home I can call my own now. That's why I take it so kindly of you to ask me in. I could see you was a good sort the second I set eyes on you. Oh, yes, you are. A handsome woman, too, if I may say so. Don't often see a figure like yours these days. All skin an' bone the women I see about. Like hairpins. There, *your* hair's all right, don't need tidying. Nice lot of it you've got, too. Ah, I can see what you're after. Well, there's no harm in a kiss, is there? How d'ye like that, eh? You won't get kisses like that from a pen-pushing landlubber. I must say, you're a nice friendly sort o' wench. Bit different to my old girl. She's just turned me out. Offered me the sofa to sleep on. The sofa! Never been so insulted in my life. In my own home, too! Sticks in my throat even now, that does. But I took it dignified. Very well, I says, if that's how you feel, I won't inflict my company on you any longer. And out I marches. Left 'em all dumbfounded.

"Not that I blame the missus so much. It's that young devil of a Nora. To think that my daughter, the same I used to dandle on my knee when she was a baby, would grow up so hard. She's been poisoning her mother's mind against me, that's what she's been doing. Course, I'm not cut out for the respectable father of a family. I admit that. I got my faults. Have I ever denied it? But I got my feelings, too. And they been outraged to-day, outraged, I tell you. Now, look here, ma'am,

I don't want any dirty jokes ! Let you an' me understand each other. You been very friendly an' I appreciate it. I was showing how I trust you by opening my heart, tellin' you all my troubles. And you must go an' upset the party by making jokes like that. All right, if you meant no offence, there's no offence taken. I don't mind if I do. Here's to better times. Jeez, it's doing me good, this whisky is. All right, course I'll kiss you, if that's what you want. Yes, I'm fond of you. Haven't I said so ?

" It's a bit hard on a man, coming home after fourteen years. That's what they tell me it is, fourteen years, though I didn't reckon it was so much, myself. And finding my own wife an' childer turned against me. Wore myself out, that's what I have, sweating and shovelling, and food a pig wouldn't look at. Shipwrecked twice I been, an' torpedoed, an' lucky to get out of the stokehold before the boilers bust. No one knows what a life it is, except them as lives it. Not that I'm grousin'. I made my bed an' I got to lie on it. Only, with my experience and my reputation, for I'm known in most ports as a first-class man at my job, I looks for a bit of natural respect. And do I get it ? Do I hell's like ! Shipboard is no place for a chap with a bit of spunk in him. They don't know how to treat you like a human being. Underpaid, sweated, worn to death. Cursed at by any whippersnapper with a bit o' gold braid to put on his sleeve. Spied on ! That's what I was in the bloody *Benediction*. Spied on night an' day, by a bastard of a Scotch engineer. Every word I spoke taken a note of and counted against me. If I so much as looked my feelings, down it went in his little black book. Oh, I know he kept it in his cabin. The steward told me. The Chief's keeping a record of your misbehaviour, he says, in a little black book. Locks it up in his safe, he says,

but it's all there. The Chief's made up his mind to get rid of you, the steward says. He's got you taped. Did you ever hear of such a dirty, underhand stinker ?

" He's ruined me, that swine has. Dumped me on the shore, here in the Pool where every dockside's swarming with chaps lookin' for a ship. I'm as good as ever I was, ay, an' better. You won't see shoulders like mine every day. Feel them biceps ! Don't giggle, woman. Muscles like that comes from work, hard work, the sort o' work young fellers nowadays would faint at the thought of. And I know my job. There's not much you can tell me about engines and boilers. Maybe I'm not educated, but education isn't everything. Not by a long chalk. There's many an educated engineer, with all his tickets hanging up at home in oak frames, that's been glad to have Peter McCabe about to consult in times of stress and difficulty. I've got a reputation and I've earned it. But I'm not so young as I was, an' they'll hold that against me. I know they will, blast them. What does it count for now, all the years I've sweated my guts out to keep shipowners in their mansions and their Rolls-Royces ? What good has it done me ? What have I got to show for it ? Not a penny piece saved. Wait, I'll tell you what I've got to show for it. Look ! That's where my arm was scalded, near scalded off my body, the time I saved the rotten old boilers of the *Evelyn Hope* from blowing up. They give me a watch and chain for that, the owners did. Bloody fools ! What good's a watch an' chain, solid gold an' all, to a poor bleedin' ship's fireman ? I popped it in Santos, and strike me if the bastard in the shop didn't knock the price down 'cause my name was inscribed on the case. Said it made it difficult to sell again.

" If I'd been sent to school regular when I was a kid, and put into the apprenticeship, it might 'a been differ-

ent. I'd have been a real engineer, not one of these theoretic blokes, the sort that knows exactly what ought to be done but couldn't do it himself to save his life. With my talent for tinkering with engines, I reckon I'd be Chief on one of them transatlantic boats, with white paint on my cabin, dining off caviare and oysters in the saloon, and dancin' with millionaire's wives every night. It's a grand time some of them fellers has of it, I believe. Yes, if things had only gone a bit different for me, I'd be retiring on superannuation pay, and I'd have a nice little house in New Brighton by now, with the mortgage near paid off, and a bit of garden back and front. But I never had any luck. I never would cringe and touch my cap and say Yes, sir, No, sir. That's why I never got on. That's why I'm on the beach at fifty-four. That's why my own daughter won't give me a civil word, and turns her mother against me. Oh, Christ, let's have another drink. It's the only thing makes life worth living.

" The *Benediction* sails about midnight, with the tide, an' I'm not goin' with her. I wonder if they expect me to go down an' wave good-bye ? If I do, I'll give that swine a sailor's farewell. He'd better not show himself if I'm about. If it wasn't for him, I'd been perfectly happy. I'm not a bad feller. I never start a row. It's a funny thing, I've had a lot of scraps in my time, but I can't ever remember starting the trouble. It's always been the other way. Don't matter where you go, you find some stinker who thinks that a quiet, hard-working seaman is dirt under his feet. And though I'm law-abiding, I got my pride. I don't let anyone wipe their feet on me. Oh, get along, leave me alone ! I don't want your paws on me. I'm not in the mood for it. Drink up, an' be a good girl."

3

" It's queer, coming home and finding your kids grown up. I knew they'd be different. I'd reckoned that out. Only, somehow it gives you a shock. Like meeting strangers instead of your own flesh and blood. I felt proper shy, I don't mind admitting, only Nora never give me a chance to make friends. Went for me like a regular spitfire cat, she did. She's got spirit. I don't deny that. Takes after her old man, that way. But she's hard, and I was always soft, underneath. Why, a babe in arms could manage me if it went the right way about it. I'm a rough diamond, but that's all on the surface. Underneath, as I said, I'm soft. Why, d'you know, when I was talking to you about Gertie Gitana, and the old songs, I was nearly in tears. I couldn't help thinkin' how me and the missus used to sing the choruses, years ago, up in the gallery on a Saturday night. But that there Nora, I don't suppose she's ever shed a tear in her life. I remember when she was a bit of a kid, and I had occasion to fetch her one for something, she wouldn't cry and she wouldn't curse, but she'd just go away, quiet, and look at me. I seen hate in her eyes, I have. Nasty, to find a kid like that. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised the way she's turned out.

" Uppish, too. Daresay she thinks her Dad's not good enough for her. Not her class. A common sailor man ! I suppose you know her, don't you, livin' on the next floor ? Well, tell me straight, she *is* a bit above herself, isn't she ? Am I right or am I wrong ? I thought so. She works in a big shop, does she ? Fashions ? Ah, that accounts for it. Lays herself out to be a lady, I'll bet. And that's a proper soft easy-going chap she's got hold of. Engineer without a ship. Not that I hold that against him. For an engineer, he

didn't strike me as a bad sort. But Nora's got him under her thumb all right. His life won't be worth calling his own, once she's got him tied up, though I says it myself and she's my own daughter.

" Fill it up, then. You're a generous woman, I'll say that for you. And come to think of it, you'll know my other daughter, the young one, Connie. I got a glimpse of her, going off in a painted-up little car with a dressed-up young clerk. If I'd only been sure it was her, I'd have stopped the pair of them and asked the young feller what game he was playing at. No man's going to take my daughter out on a dark night without I know all about him. I seen too much o' that sort o' thing in New York. The things that bits o' girls does these days ! I'm told it's not so bad over here, but my experience is, human nature's the same the whole world over. Pretty young girls is never safe. And my Connie's real pretty now, isn't she ? Dresses smart, too. What does she do ? I mean, where does she earn a living ? Hair-dressing ? You don't mean one o' them manicure girls in a men's parlour ? Thank God for that ! I wouldn't have a minute's sleep if she'd sunk to that. Ladies' permanent waves is different. I'll bet she's clever with her fingers. She's the real McCoy. The real McCabe, I ought to say, eh ? And I let her go by me in the street without a word. Perhaps I'll meet her one day outside her shop, before I find a boat. I believe she's one after my own heart. We'd get along together. Besides, I ought to give her a word of advice about that young chap in the golf clothes.

" What's that you say ? My son ? Now don't try to be funny, or I'll fetch you one across the kisser ! I got no son ! Many's the time I thought bitterly about it. Made me brood a lot. I'm a man that thinks deep at times, and I worried and worried often enough 'cause

both my kids are girls. Not that I wanted 'em any different, but a man can make a pal out of his own boy. That's only natural. What are you getting at? My name's Peter McCabe and that's my wife on the next floor up. That's my daughters living with her. I don't know anything about a boy. Fourteen, you say? Might 'a been after I went away? What's he like? Does he take after me? Goes to a secondary school, does he? Scholarship! Strike me, it must be true! An' I never set eyes on him! Never even knew he'd been born!

"But look here, what the hell does it mean? Why didn't my missus tell me about the kid? Standing there, looking injured and never letting a word about him out of her trap. Not a word! I might 'a gone away again and never had an idea. I'm going up right now to find where he is. And I'm going to tell that woman of mine off, by God I am. Offering me the bleeding sofa and keeping my own son hidden away! Now, don't you interfere. I don't care if I am making a row on the stairs. It's none o' your business. This is the door, isn't it? That'll wake 'em up. I hope it gives 'em heart disease. Yes, it's me! Let me in or I'll smash the door down. What's that? Gone out, have they? Is there no other way in? I've got to see my son or know the reason why. What's up there? The bedrooms. Let's see. It's me, woman! Where's my son? If you're there, lad, let me in. Never fear, it's only your old Dad come back from sea. *Are* they out, or are they just keeping quiet? They won't mend that door in a hurry. I told you I still had my strength. Not a soul!

"What's that you're saying? Speak up. Maybe the boy isn't fourteen yet? What are you getting at? Jesus, are you suggesting my old woman'd do a thing like that? Of course, he's my son. I'll choke the life out of you, if you suggest he's not. Let me tell you, my missus is

a decent woman, and always has been. Maybe we've had our differences, but she's not a bloody half-time harlot like you. What! Only fit to fight a woman, am I? Afraid of that bloody Chief engineer, am I? I'll show you. Here, get out o' this room! It belongs to my wife. Downstairs with you. No, I'm not coming. I've had enough o' your kisses and rubbing yourself all over me. There's a quid to pay for the whisky. Don't worry, I'll not lay a finger on you again. I'm going out to have a drink with men, real men, sailor men. Get in there and do your boozing alone."

4

"The bilker, the dirty Irish bilker," muttered Mrs. Gibson, pouring out whisky and feeling with trembling fingers the bruises on her throat. She drank, and then sat down at the table and buried her face in her arms and wept till the artificial silk of her blouse was soaked and stained. Presently she slept as she sat there.

CHAPTER IX

EXPERIENCE

1

"THE river road's quicker," said Maurice. "We'll just catch the ferry if we're smart. Watch me make her rip."

"So we're going across the water?"

Maurice nodded, pressed the horn to attract a policeman's attention, dropped a gear and shot across the tramlines and on to the "setts," the flat-surfaced cobbles designed to give purchase to the straining hooves of the horses, the draught horses, the pride of Liverpool, which moved on flat-topped lorries almost everything

unloaded at the docks, and transported it up and down the city's seventy-seven hills.

" Can't feel the setts, can you ? " inquired Maurice. " That's what I call good springing. We're doing sixty-five."

Connie did not ask their destination more particularly, or suggest another direction for the evening's jaunt. She knew that young men with cars and plenty of money to spend were not easily come by. The supply was never sufficient for the demand. So she counted herself lucky to be here beside Maurice, in a sports car which looked smart and new and moved over the road so fast that the tyres screamed and the headlights thrust their fan of luminosity like a glittering swift knife through the darkness. Although she was perky and aggressive in manner, Connie's valuation of herself was, in its assumptions, humble. She drew little gratification from her employment as a permanent-wave operator in the Store. It set her apart from ordinary assistants, and lent her the distinction of a white drill coat : but the management of the Store, shrewd in everything, realised that girls of Connie's type would be quite willing to perform specially skilled labour without the inducement of higher wages. So Connie drew each Friday (Saturday was too busy a day) a sealed envelope on which her name was written and which contained exactly the same amount that was paid to every girl of her age in the Store. Connie was twenty-two and received thirty shillings each week. She was not allowed to take tips but she earned, on an average, a weekly commission of two shillings, representing one penny for each pound she sent through the pneumatic tubes to the under-ground locked room where girls of fourteen and fifteen years sat the day long, stamping bills and giving change. For this thirty-two shillings, which was not likely ever

to increase and was a sum envied by girls in other stores, Connie left home every morning before eight o'clock and did not return, except on the Wednesday half-holiday, till nearly twelve hours later. On Saturday, she counted herself lucky if she reached home before nine o'clock at night. Yet she was in better case than the ordinary assistants who, during the eight sale periods and the Christmas season, more than a third of the year, had to work in the Store long after the doors were closed to the public, and very often were requested—a request they dare not refuse—to appear an hour earlier in the morning.

Having to expend so much physical and nervous energy almost every day of her life for a wage which compelled her to buy the cheapest food, clothing, lodging, cosmetics, amusements, and medicines obtainable; knowing that hundreds of other girls would bless their stars for the opportunity to step into her job; knowing that on any Saturday night, if trade fell off, if one of the dozens of managers conceived a new scheme of reorganisation or had an attack of dyspepsia, or if any of hundreds of other incalculable chances over which she had no control came into operation, she might find herself with a week's wages and no job; knowing that to the dozen directors, the hundred odd managers, the hundred odd "charge-hands," she was an employee without personality, who had to be regulated and harried and overlooked from half-past eight in the morning till seven or later at night; an inefficient, cheap but fortunately easily replaceable cog in a vast machine; knowing all this, or rather feeling it deep and wordlessly in the humiliation of her heart, it was small wonder that Connie set no great value on herself.

She had her consolations. The moral stimulus administered to the staff by the management at judicious

intervals, the early morning lectures on " Beating all Previous Sales Records," and " The Meaning of the Store for Service," all this " uplift," with its barely concealed, calculated intention to obtain more work for the same wages, and its peroration of emphasised threats (the mask of benevolence removed for the moment)—" those who don't put their backs into it may find a nasty little message in their pay envelopes at the end of the week "—Connie had learned to take with a straight face and inward, cynical amusement. She could find her way through her daily tasks without getting into more than temporary trouble. A number of regular customers, who liked her, and whose " little ways " she knew, would always ask for her by name. She had the attentions of Maurice Bruno in her scant off-time, and astonishing glimpses into the life of affluent people who sat about in hotels and ordered drinks without giving a second's thought to the cost. Moreover, beyond all that, she had the hope and prospect of being delivered from economic bondage by finding herself a husband.

She did not often think directly about marriage or consider it as an immediate possibility. She might want to marry Bruno or she might not. She was not at all sure that he wanted to marry her. But, sooner or later, she intended to get married. Of only one thing was she sure—she would not marry a poor man. Her estimation of poverty and wealth, however, was vague. She had little idea how much it cost Maurice to run his car and replace it each year with a new model, to own five suits and be able to stand dinners at the Adelphi Hotel to men with whom he wanted to do business. She only knew that he was obviously much better off than any other person she knew. He was a symbol of hope. In resolving to marry " a man with money " she was exercising an instinct to escape from her present poverty.

A temperamental optimism made her confident that, when she wished to, she would be able to fall in love with a man who would marry her, but she was shrewd enough to realise that marriage did not inevitably follow as a consequence of her good looks. She was pretty, she dressed smartly, exceedingly smartly considering her tenuous resources, and she could entertain members of the opposite sex with her charm, with repartee and slangy comments, with the dazzle and volatility of her loveliness, with the half-promises and occasional languors of her eyes, sometimes with the kisses and embraces she suffered rather than shared in. Lately, however, she was growing afraid of love-making ; it had become no longer a tribute to her beauty and domination from which she could remain in a state of gratified detachment ; it had developed into a response, more lavish than she looked for, to her own desires, a power not sent out of herself any longer but striking upon her from the unknown mystery of masculinity, and dropping, warm and intimate, terrifying and yet enthralling, into the intimacy of her senses. She had discovered herself in a miscalculation. There was more in sex than she had reckoned on, and, until she could build up her hard confidence again, she must go warily.

Connie was vain. She liked to catch glimpses of her red hair and her clear blue eyes, her swinging, supple hips and the flash of her stockings, as she walked by shop windows in the streets. She enjoyed being admired. This was almost the only value her circumstances allowed her to set on herself, that she could make men admire her and pay her tribute, chocolates, suppers, theatre and cinema and dancing excursions, and motor-car drives. This was the only foundation for her self-respect, and she did not question it. She did not ask if she could do her job better than the next girl, or earn more money,

or acquire knowledge or sharpen her wits. She could make men turn their heads when she passed, and she had Maurice Bruno willing to call for her once or twice a week and spend in entertaining her more in one evening than she earned in a fortnight. This seemed to her sufficient to prop up the self-esteem without which neither she nor anyone else could be happy, and which the Store, with its harrying and overseeing and incessant personal reproofs, continually attempted to destroy.

So she was content to sit beside Bruno and stare through the windscreen as the car raced over the wet roadway between the dock-walls and the shadowy brick warehouses, knowing only that they were going somewhere the other side of the Mersey, and grateful for the adventure.

2

At the Eye Hospital, Bruno forked right, slowed his pace a moment and presently drove, with a loud blast of the horn, under the ugly structure of the Overhead Railway, past the dock entrances and on to the loosely jointed " Floating Bridge " which slopes down from the Pier Head. He drove fast and, when Connie exclaimed aloud, he laughed, but put his foot on the brake as they neared the foot. Then he swung the car with an ostentatious sweep on to the lamp-lighted stretch of the Landing Stage, an immense floating wharf, its planks supported by air-filled pontoons, joined by flexible bridges to the sandstone waterfront, and almost a mile long. Maurice spared no attention for the towering liners moored against the Landing Stage, or the passenger ferry-boats. He sounded the horn as he saw the blue-jerseyed deck-hands about to hoist the gangway of a " luggage " boat and, swinging the wheel left now, ran

the car on to the boat, applying his brakes with a jerk that made the chassis quiver and stopped the bonnet, first time, six inches from the tail of a post office van. With quick turns of his wrist he put out the lights and stilled the engine.

" Done it ! " he announced with satisfaction. " That's better than waiting another half-hour or going up the river to Runcorn."

" Oh, you can drive all right."

Straining back in the narrow seat, digging an elbow, without apologies, into Connie's side, Maurice opened his overcoat, produced a cigarette case and a petrol lighter. They smoked for a moment in silence.

" Like to get out and stretch your legs."

" I'm all right, thanks. It's cosy in here."

" Keep the rug tight round you." He leaned across and she felt his long fingers thrusting and tucking around her waist and her thighs, and then a protracted pressure, a long stroking caress. She shifted uneasily.

" Bit early for that, isn't it ? " she asked, lending her voice the inflexion she knew as " sarcky."

Maurice gave her a sidelong, inquisitive look, his eyes glittering as bright and metallic in the half-light as the chromium plating of the car, but he sat back and ostentatiously rested one hand on the steering wheel while the other traced occasional flamboyant curves through the darkness as he put the cigarette to his lips and withdrew it again.

The ferryboat was broadly built, with a red and black funnel, its almost circular deck packed now with motor-cars, delivery-vans, haulage-wagons and one caravan bound for an indoor fair-ground in Cheshire. Connie looked round from her seat at the other vehicles and their drivers. There was no Rolls or Bentley on board : a Hillman saloon, a big Austin with a chauffeur (but the

cellulose looked no longer new), a Riley, and half a dozen miscellaneous and ageing cars which had probably never cut much dash even in their younger days. Not one vehicle could compare with Maurice's sports car for style and newness and speed, and Connie felt with a pleasurable sense of gratification that where she sat was the natural centre of importance of the ferryboat. This gratification was increased when she recognised, in a closed Morris, with the out-of-date round radiator, the charge-hand of the Fancy Laces Department, Miss Whitemarsh, sitting beside a man in a bowler hat who looked, Connie decided, twice her age. Connie smiled and waved, but the other girl turned away. Nevertheless, Connie knew she had been seen, and knew that Miss Whitemarsh bitterly resented the spectacle of another girl from the Store in a newer and more expensive and more polished car than the one she sat in. Do her good, thought Connie, and turned to survey the river they were crossing.

At this point the estuary narrowed, but nearly a mile of water separated the Liverpool Landing Stage from the smaller ferry-heads at Birkenhead and Seacombe. The sky was half clouded-over, the moon showing intermittently and through a misty radiance, with a clear field of stars only further inland, above the wide spread of water and sand and mud where the incoming tides lost most of their impetus. In consequence, the full size and contour of the estuary were imperceptible in the darkness; even the wind-agitated surface of the water could not be seen more than a few yards away from the ferryboat, except where it revealed, beneath another ship's lights, the silver upsurge of foam and the opalescent mutability of waves that formed and lingered a moment, tumescent and poised, before they were sucked down and replaced by a thousand evanescent shapes.

The night was suffused with blue, a darkly-glowing, impenetrable blue suspended above and around, permeating nearness and distance and proportion ; the long lines of lamps along the shores stretched south to Rock Ferry and north to the bend of the peninsula beyond New Brighton, and were apparently joined to the lights of Seaforth and Bootle, and in turn linked to those banked-up upon the hills of Liverpool which accumulated, at the waterfront, in the brilliant cluster of the Landing Stage. There, aloft, inset in a steepling shadow against the sky, glowed the pale green clock faces of the Liver Building. Night had subtracted solidity and measurement and comparison from the scene, together with its drab colours and ugly shapes, and the shore lights seemed like a girdle of jewels, neither near nor far, flung around the river darkness, through which the ferryboats, each with its red and green side-lamps hoisted above the golden window-squares of the saloons, made secret, sibilant traffickings.

Connie and Maurice sat in the car as in a core of privacy, walled-in with dark-blue blindness, remote from the world, but able to observe its fixed and moving coruscations. The wind on the river was gusty and chill. It whistled round the screen of the car and stung Connie's cheeks. She held her gloved hands under the rug, and her arm against Maurice's was warm and firm.

" It'll be less windy once we're away from the river," Maurice told her, holding out half-a-crown to the man with a ticket punch who was stumbling around the cluttered deck, collecting fares.

" Let's hope so."

" Hungry ? I am. We'll have supper in Chester. I know a place. How's that suit you ? "

" Drive on, Macduff," said Connie. " You can't get there too soon for me."

The ferryboat slid smoothly alongside the floating stage at Birkenhead, and presently, the tenth vehicle to leave, they were pulling slowly in bottom gear up a long incline, behind a lorry laden with sacks of sugar.

" Once we get off this," Maurice declared, " I'll show you."

At the top of the incline he spun the wheel vehemently, made his engine roar, and, gathering speed, shot them past the head of the column which had left the ferry. They left the tramway tracks and tore through the lighted streets of Port Sunlight ; soon clean country air was streaming past their faces and the headlights were lighting up, curve after curve, the winding road, lined with unleafed hedges, which led into Chester.

They spent only three-quarters of an hour over supper in the big restaurant of the hotel, where there were no waitresses, only waiters, and the food came quickly and silently, with no clattering of cutlery. It was not served on plates, Connie noted, nor even were the dishes put on the table for you to help yourself, but the waiter came and bent beside you and lifted hors d'œuvre and turbot and chicken and french beans, one course after another, on to your plate, using fork and spoon with one hand in a deft manner that fascinated Connie. She knew this was the most expensive sort of hotel, and she would have liked to linger over her food, but Maurice was in a hurry, and she had to take the fizzy champagne in quick gulps. It gave her a sickly taste up her nose.

By the time the coffee came, she was feeling a little strange, irresponsible, and because she recognised the irresponsibility, wary. She watched Maurice across the table, and was not quite sure if she liked him so much, even though he did in some ways remind her of Ivor

Novello. Perhaps his long black lashes, which threw little shadows down on to his cheeks, were too long. Perhaps his fingers, tapering and with shallow nails cut square across, were too white? Or was it the hairs on the back of his hands and his wrists, thick and black and always damp-looking, that made his skin seem whiter than it ought to be? Better not to judge now. She was not seeing things normally: the lights in the restaurant seemed to have acquired an excessive brightness; they made her eyes ache whenever she looked around the room. Her body was filled with a restless tensity, and when she spoke her voice sounded far away, like somebody else's voice, shrill and resounding in her ears. She kept on talking to prevent herself thinking about her queer voice and the hazy instability of the far side of the restaurant. She grew a little querulous.

"What's the hurry, anyway?" she demanded. "Can't I have a cigarette with my coffee?"

Maurice had paid the bill now, and, when the waiter had taken his half-crown and moved discreetly away, he answered, "You can smoke in the car, if you want to."

"You know I hate that. The wind blows the smoke down my throat and makes me cough. Anyhow, what's all the rush about?"

He rapped his knuckles twice on the table, and drew his brows down. The long lashes narrowed till there was hardly a glint of light showing from his eyes. Then he smiled, the gold tooth gleaming in the long row of even white as his lips curled softly open.

"I was keeping it as a surprise for you. I thought we'd call on some friends of mine, not far from here, and have a drink with them. They've got a nice little place in the country. You'd like them."

"Do they know we're coming? Have you told them about me?"

"No."

"They may be away."

"What's the odds? It's not far and we can come back here if you like. Hurry up, kid. They mix a special kind of cocktail I'd like you to try. Or, I don't know. Perhaps not. It might be too strong for you."

"I'll drink any cocktail that ever was made. Try anything once. That's my motto."

She was standing up now, rather surprised to find that she could move steadily, although her eyes still seemed to be open extraordinarily wide. She shook off Maurice's hand from her elbow and marched out with her head erect and her shoulders swinging. Two men in evening dress turned to look at her as she went between the tables, and, although she did not give them a glance, she knew they were appraising her admiringly.

4

The house stood on a hillside, a brick bungalow, alone, at the end of a narrow lane which was so steep that Maurice had to shift to bottom gear. When the roar of the engine ceased, an intense silence dropped all around them, outlined rather than broken by the intermittent hissing of the wind and the creak and stir of the tree branches overhead. Not a light showed in any of the windows.

"They're all out," said Connie with satisfaction. "What did I tell you?"

"We'll have a shot anyhow."

Maurice swung himself out of the driving seat and walked up to the front door. He pressed the bell. No light or sound answered him. He pressed again, and then lifted the knocker and rattled it three times, noisily, urgently.

"Give it up," jeered Connie.

Maurice walked slowly back towards the car, and in a moment he was leaning over her, so that she could smell the honey-sweet perfume of his greased hair, and his eyes, lambent and questioning, were staring into hers.

" I've got a key," he said. " Come along in and try that cocktail ? "

" What ! I never heard of such an idea."

" Don't be silly. They're friends of mine, I tell you. That's what they let me have a key for. So I can get in anytime I come this way and find they're not at home."

" That's all very well, but they don't reckon on you taking a girl into the place when it's empty. Why, what would I say if your friend's wife came back and found us drinking her cocktails in her drawing-room without with your leave or by your leave ? "

" Who said anything about anybody's wife ? Place belongs to a couple of chaps I know. In business. They use it for fishing and shooting mostly. They won't mind a bit."

" I don't care. I'm not going into any empty house at this time of night with you or anyone else."

" Of course, if you're afraid ! "

" Afraid ? Don't be so silly ! I can keep you in your place, Maurice Bruno, if I want to."

" Perhaps you won't always want to ? " he suggested impudently.

" Are you giving me a dare ? "

" As you like. I believe you're scared stiff of that cocktail. Why, even the wine at Chester made you feel a bit funny, didn't it ? "

" No, it did *not*." She pushed open the door on the far side from him, and walked round in front of the bonnet. " Come on, where's your key ? I suppose you know how to mix this cocktail you're talking so big about ? "

" Sure I do." He turned the key, walked into the dark hall and held the door open for her.

" Just one thing. I'm not taking more than one cocktail and you're to keep your hands off me while we're inside. I'm not a sucker, Maurice Bruno. So don't think I am."

" All right. Shut the door while I find the switch."

The lights revealed a small hall, and then successively a dining-room furnished conventionally in dark oak, and a drawing-room with a settle built into the wall round the fireplace, two armchairs, a cocktail cabinet with black glass doors, a radio set.

Maurice immediately made the large electric fire start its imitation coals into a semblance of burning.

" Got to take the chill off this room," he said. " And it's not only the room either. Come over and warm yourself while I get busy with this shaker."

" What goes into it ? " Connie asked, standing before the fire and feeling a warm glow creeping up the calves of her legs. " Besides gin, I mean ? "

" Aha, wouldn't you like to know ! " Maurice was now carefully calculating measures from various bottles of coloured liquids.

" I don't care. So long as you don't slip any grey powder out of a paper while my back's turned."

" The wicked baronet, eh ? Well, don't turn your back. There, that's the lot. Now for the mix-up."

Connie watched as he stood there, with his woolly " teddy-bear " coat open and his brown plus fours showing, the long strands of his hair quivering up and down on his head as he agitated the shaker he held diagonally across his chest. He looked quite attractive now, she thought, with a glow rising through his sallow cheeks and his eyes with that faraway look in them, large and soft, like big amber beads, and his black hair disarranged,

one lock falling over his forehead. What was he thinking of? Why had he brought her here? Of course, he'd known all along the place was empty. But she wasn't afraid of him. He'd be quite satisfied with a bit of fun. He'd want to kiss her presently, kiss her eyes and her mouth and her chin and her throat and nuzzle his lips down into the opening of her blouse, while his hands held her closer and closer to him, cupping the shape of her breast and sliding down from her waist, pressing her thigh into his, feeling the whole shape of her body through her clothes, and then leaning back and gazing at her, his eyes looking very large and solemn between those dark lashes of his, until his kisses became passionate and urgent again. He wanted her badly, but he knew, as well as she did, that he couldn't have her, because he hadn't asked her to marry him, and she was no fool. He knew just what he could get from her. He wanted more, and he'd take it if he could, like any other chap. They were all the same. They were just like kids trying to steal jam. You had to slap their hands. There was one fellow—she'd had to slap *his* face, hard, and scratch. But Maurice wasn't like that. He was soft. He'd take the lead, and boss her about, until it came to that, and then he'd be scared. The funny thing was, it made her laugh, and as soon as she began to laugh she felt all gentle and tender with him. It was nice, the way he flicked that loose lock of hair back into place with a jerk of his head. She'd ruffle it properly for him afterwards, and wipe the hair-oil off her fingers with his handkerchief when it was time to go home.

"You'll shake the drinks away to nothing, if you go on much longer," she observed caustically. With a start, Maurice came out of his reverie and put the shaker down. He opened a cupboard and took out two large green glasses and a bottle of preserved cherries.

" You're sure you want to ? "

" Go on, pour it out. But I'm taking only one, remember."

He laughed at her, uncertainly. " I dare say one'll be enough."

" Happy days ! " he called, raising the glass to her.

" And happy nights ! " she answered daringly, foolishly, yielding to an impulse too sudden and powerful for her to realise in time its dangerous provocation. She finished the drink at the third sip, and when she looked up he was beside her, taking the glass from her hand, smiling at her, one hand on her elbow.

" Well ? "

" Oh, that's nothing. Not a bad cocktail at all."

" Say ' thank you,' say it nicely ! "

She turned up her face to his, and, as his arms went round her, he swung her aslant on her hips, so that she was forced backwards and had to cling to his shoulders to maintain her balance. Her head swam with dizziness and a new informing heat as his kisses came swift and bruising on her lips.

" Here, that's enough of that," she cried, pushing him away. She looked round the room for distraction, and her glance came to rest on the radio set.

" Will that thing work ? " she asked.

" Of course."

" Well, find a decent band and we'll dance for a bit. Your friends won't mind, will they, if we kick these rugs out of the way ? "

It was not much relief to be dancing. Maurice was light on his feet, and his style suited hers, but she was feeling queer, no doubt about it. She should never have come into this empty house. She should never have taken that cocktail on top of that fizzy wine. Better just keep on dancing till her head was clear again. The

music came from the loud-speaker in a slow rhythm, the strings pulsating and throbbing as clear as if you could see the players there. She was dancing to a tune played by a band in Leipzig, to a tango in the Spanish idiom, and she was dancing all alone with Maurice in a strange house on the Welsh border, and her head was queer, and her body full of warm impulses, though her legs, bracing, turning and striding under her woollen frock, never failed to obey that masterful rhythm which went on and on and had complete possession of her.

Presently the guitars and the mandolins ceased, and, with hardly a pause, the room was filled with the nervous melancholy wailing of saxophones.

" Fox-trot," said Maurice unnecessarily, and swung her off into the rapid, hesitating and recovering measure. He held her tight to him as he danced ; she could feel the thrust of his chest against the points of her breasts, and the clip of his arm in her back ; her head kept sliding and nodding down towards his shoulders ; the scent of his hair was in her nostrils ; and, while they went turning and turning and the saxophones echoed from wall to wall, she saw his eyes blazing wide at her, entranced with some secret voluptuous dreaming that fixed on her but never saw her.

" Oh, I can't ! I can't go on any longer ! " she cried. When he stopped, and she forced herself out of his clasp, she staggered for a moment.

" Leave me alone. I'll be all right in a minute. It's too close in here."

She was afraid he would taunt her, but he said nothing. He looked bewildered, and younger than she had ever seen him, at a loss what to do or say.

" I'll go and lie down for a minute or two. I'll soon be all right." With her hand on the side of the door, she felt a momentary return of confidence.

" You stay here ! " she bade him, defiantly, commandingly, but impudently also ; her grin had an impudent significance.

5

In the bedroom, the light from the hall enabled her to see what she was doing. She kicked off her shoes, pulled back the silk coverlet on the nearer bed and lay down. Once her eyes were shut, she felt the dizziness receding, although her body still seemed unnaturally light and insubstantial. What bothered her most was the thought of Maurice : she hoped he wouldn't go telling his friends how a cocktail, a mere solitary cocktail, had knocked her out. But he wouldn't ! He'd be ashamed to admit that he'd had her alone in an empty house and got no more from her than a dance and a kiss or two. It was rather nice being kissed by someone who meant it, someone who knew how to make you feel things, who wasn't afraid of being rough. It was exciting. Better than dancing, better than doing seventy in the car on a clear road, with the bridges and the little hills and valleys swooping up and down underneath you, making you catch your breath and laugh.

It wasn't likely Nora would ever have fun like that. Her only hope was Ben, and he'd never have a car of his own. And he wouldn't know how to kiss like Maurice, wouldn't dare to, even if he knew how. They'd be at the movies now, Nora and Ben, holding each other's hands and feeling ever so daring and romantic. What would Nora say if she knew her sister was miles away in the country, not in the car at all, but lying on a bed, with Maurice in the next room, only a few yards away ? Maurice was funny ! He was crazy to come in to her, you bet he was. But he couldn't make up his mind if she'd let him, or if she'd scream and bite and scratch.

Just like a little kid, all wanting, and yet frightened to death. Nice kid though. Nice to be near him. She wasn't feeling sickish now. That had all gone, and she felt fine. She'd like to sing, but quietly, to herself. She felt all warm and soft and beautiful. She was sure she looked beautiful, lying there. She'd ask Maurice to switch the wireless on again, so she could hear it through the hall.

" Maurice ! Maurice ! " she called, and her voice was soft and clear.

He came on tiptoeing feet. He was in the doorway, looking at her with those ridiculously big eyes of his, looking at her with excited inquiries. She mustn't smile ! But she couldn't help it.

In a second he was beside her, his arm under her, arching her up to him, his mouth on her mouth, and the honey-sweet perfume he brought with him making her faint and languorous.

What did it matter, after all !

CHAPTER X

THE TOP OF THE TIDE

I

It was dark night when Ben Satterthwaite dropped off the Bootle train and turning sharp right made his way to the Dock Road. He had not much wanted to come, but now that he had said he would, an hour or two walking along the northern foreshore of the river seemed more attractive than the cold bed-sitting-room of his lodgings. He had said that he might be able to discover which was Peter McCabe's ship and when it was due to sail, but now that he was alone he deceived himself no longer. Hundreds of ships were moored in the docks of Merseyside that night. In daylight you could see their masts, or the topmost spars, and sometimes their funnels, showing above the ridged roofs of the warehouses for mile after mile, and almost as many on the other side, where the dock basins of Birkenhead wound inland till they almost reached the sandy inlet of the Dee. How the devil, among all that shipping, was he to trace one unimportant greaser, who might or might not have been slung out of his job that day? It was a hopeless task, and he wasn't going to attempt it. He'd only thrown out the suggestion to pacify Mrs. McCabe and persuade her away to the cinema. That was what she needed, something to take her mind off things.

The situation, Ben admitted, had him puzzled, with all those quarrels and nasty hints flying about. It wasn't so much Mrs. McCabe being upset about her husband coming home after all those years, marching in on her like that, and throwing his weight about. The old man

was a bad lot, clear enough, and never would be any good to his family. That was not hard to understand. But Nora and Connie for ever flying at each other's throats—what sense was there in that? It wasn't as if they weren't fond of each other, but there was something between them, something secret and hurting, only they'd never let it out entirely. Why couldn't they have a real good row, once and for all, and be done with it? As it was he never knew where he stood with the two of them. Connie was as nice as pie to him, but sometimes Nora would hint that she was only pretending, was in fact laughing at him all the time up her sleeve. But if he asked Nora straight out, " Not a bit of it ! " she would say, and swear that Connie really liked him.

Connie was cheeky to Nora, far too often. A girl ought to show her elder sister proper respect. Of course, having a fellow like Bruno gave her the upper hand over Nora. It hurt Ben's pride once again to concede that he couldn't take Nora around and spend money on her the way Bruno did with Connie. It was only natural that Nora should feel a bit ashamed. She wouldn't admit it—Nora was fine !—but all the same it must be there, and no doubt it made things a bit awkward at home. Perhaps it was true what people said ! A man who was out of a job had no right to keep a girl tied up to him with an engagement ring, spoiling her chances of getting married to another fellow. He'd been thinking a lot about that lately, but ten to one if he tried to explain to Nora she'd only misunderstand him, and think he wanted to drop her. It was perfectly possible she might even say " yes," and never let on what she was feeling, but she would be hurt, terribly hurt. And he'd do anything in the world rather than hurt her. Besides, he didn't want to stop being engaged ; he wanted to marry her, the first chance he got. His savings were almost

dribbled away. Still, it couldn't go on much longer, this being out of a job. Even if he didn't find a ship, he'd pick up some sort of work on shore. If things weren't better by the spring, he'd sign on as a greaser, or a stoker, the way old McCabe suggested, even if it ruined his chances for ever after.

He was glad to be away from the suspicions and half-expressed doubts and temperamental conflicts of those three women. Nora by herself was all right, but often, when she was with her mother and her sister, they had a way of talking, a way of saying one thing and meaning something else in addition, which made him feel uneasy. It was worse than being in a foreign port, where the language was so foreign you couldn't get even a glimmering of it. He was relieved to be down here by the docks, even though it was night, and the wide road was empty, only half-lighted, and the great iron shutters on the warehouses, most of them, rolled down. He understood these places. He knew why they had been built, what they were for, how they were worked. If he only had a ship to be going to now, he would be happy as a sandboy. Even as it was, he felt happy enough, walking along through the half-darkness, his boots ringing on the flat-topped " setts," his eyes satisfied by the utilitarian shapes of the railway-trucks, the cranes, and the haulage ropes suspended in great loops outside the warehouse walls. All this apparatus of commerce depended on merchant-shipping, on the coming and going of thousands of smallish ugly steamers from the four quarters of the globe, and so, although he had no words for his emotion, Ben felt obscurely that it justified his choice of profession ; it lent substance to his hopes for the future.

He left the main road and the infrequent lights and soon found himself proceeding on the top of a dock-wall, only three foot wide with, five yards below him,

the sibilant whispering of water. Then he scrambled over the sluice gates and stood on the dock-head, the iron rail cold on the palms of his hands and the wind buffeting his chest and making the skin on his face contract and roughen. Thin tatters of cloud, dull-silver and grey in colour, were driving across the upper sky, and by now the moon was occasionally riding clear, almost a full disc, while the stars over the estuary were cold and resplendent, glittering in multitudes. Across the river he could trace the long line of the promenade lamps and, clos[illegible] intermittent swinging beam from the [illegible] Brighton, the shadowed shape of the [illegible]ress thrusting out from the shore at [illegible]auseway. Beyond the dock-head, the [illegible] a slackening tide, below the level within the dock b[illegible] As the curve of outer wall turned inland he could see, three miles away, the lights of the city rising in spacious, irregular terraces, through the blue darkness of the night, all of them overtopped by the pale green faces, like artificial enlarged moons, of the Liver Building clock. Seaward, the stars glittered frostily over a composite blackness in which only a few lamps outlined the divergent shores; from where he stood, there was no illusion of encirclement; the Irish Sea stretched wide across the horizon. As the tide was at the ebb, hardly a ship showed a winking, diminished lantern out beyond the Bar, but nearer at hand two transatlantic liners had moved out of the Gladstone Dock and swung at anchor in the deep channel, waiting to be first out of port on the full tide. They rose tall out of the water and, with the long successions of their golden-lighted windows, stretching from bow to distant stern, they lent a dreamy, fantastic splendour to the scene.

Within the dock basin, as Ben turned his back to the estuary, three small cargo vessels were moored against

the walls. Two of them lay almost in darkness, but beside the third half a dozen brilliant arc lamps were in full floodlight, and in that pool of pallid clarity Ben could see men busily at work and the ship's derricks swinging out and in, with great bundles in their clutches. A thin emission of steam came from the smoke-stack and trailed away, white and horizontal, against the stars.

"Trying to get away on the next tide," Ben decided, and thought he might as well take a closer look at the ship before she went. An old and slow vessel, by the look of her build, and her plates were [illegible] here they showed in the light of the arc lamp[s] [illegible]e was a ship, with boilers and driving shaf[t] [illegible]r old fashioned screw, and some lucky dev[il] [illegible] making her move through the seas f[aster] [illegible] another. Better than sticking around [illegible] nothing to do but get involved in th[e] [illegible]atisfactory quarrels of women, even if you loved one of them. He let go the rail and began to move to where the ship lay moored.

2

He walked past the bows and saw her name in faded lettering: BENEDICTION. It meant nothing to him. He had never sighted or heard of her before. Who would know about a forty-year-old tramp steamer, with boilers and plates that were probably due for condemnation the next trip but one? She was coaling, and a black cloud rose whenever a load dropped into the bunkers. The hatches were open too, and a stevedore was superintending the labourers moving bales covered in sacking from the quayside, and the men piling them in the hold as fast as the derrick dropped and released them. Ben looked at one of the bales. They were consigned to Lisbon. So that was her next trip—across the Bay?

She'd make pretty rough going of it, with her small tonnage and the clumsy, ill-raked build of her. Still, Lisbon! He had never touched there and the name appealed to him, as unknown ports do to all sailors, ingenuously expecting that they may be different from all the others, which are notoriously alike, filled with the same sort of eating and drinking places, and populated by indifferent people who can scarcely stop to be civil to strangers—except those who are only too anxious to be stopped. Lisbon! He had heard there was a cemetery there which ought to be seen, one of the sights of the world, on a hill-side. Or was it at Genoa?

He started as he heard his own name called, clearly, decisively:

"[illegible]rthwaite! Hi, Satterthwaite!"

Someone was shouting to him from the deck of the ship, high above him as he stood on the quayside, someone who was in the shadow up there but could see him plainly in the dazzling glare of the arc lamps.

"Who is it?" he called back, straining to see more clearly but able only to discern a dark silhouette leaning over a rail and waving to him.

"Henderson. Come aboard."

He remembered Henderson as his junior on the *Esmeralda*, the last ship he'd sailed in, before she was laid up to wait for better times. For a second he thought, "I'll clear out. I don't want him to find out." But he couldn't do that. Henderson was a decent fellow.

He climbed up the steep gangway and there, under a harsh yellow lamp, was Henderson waiting for him with outstretched hand.

Even while he answered, "Fine. And how are you? Sailing on the top of the tide, eh?" he could feel his thighs tautening and straddling on the deck, and his nostrils widening to the hot, thick smell of the engine-

room wafting through the alleyway. It was good to be aboard a ship again.

The awkward question came almost at once.

"And what are you doing?" Henderson asked. "What's the name of your ship?"

He answered flatly, "Haven't got one."

"It's bloody awful, isn't it," Henderson responded. "I suppose I can reckon myself lucky to be second on a rattle-plated old hooker like this. Come and have a drink in my room. It's a nasty little hole, but I've got some decent whisky."

Sitting on Henderson's chair, looking round at Henderson's bunk and his mirror and hairbrushes and hand-basin, inspecting photographs of relatives and ships and a school football team, Henderson's books and gramophone records, Ben felt himself engulfed by waves of envy and recollection and longing. But he shook them off in reminiscence, jocular, satiric, comforting to his humiliation. "Do you remember . . .?" And from Henderson, "Then there was that time . . ."

At last the talk returned to the *Benediction*.

"Oh, she's better than she looks," said Henderson. "You'd be surprised what power the old engines will cough up if they're treated properly. She'll do her eight or nine knots regularly. Come and have a look at the engine-room if you like. We've got steam up."

Ben rose to follow him.

"Bound for Lisbon, I gather?"

"Yes, but Barry for a spot more cargo first. We're hardly stopping here. Only docked this morning."

The walls and bulkheads of the engine-room were whitewashed, and the iron gratings, one above the other, which served as footwalks, the spiral staircases, and the great masses of machinery in the middle, under the eye-searing, dirty yellow radiance of the electric lamps,

looked doubly black and grotesque. Polished cylinders gleamed with iridescent uneasy writhings, the stilled crank-pins with their connecting-rods, the cross-heads and oiled bearings, glittered darkly, like supple, sleeping animals in forest shadows. From the far end of this whitewashed vault came a rosy intermittent glare and great soft pushes of hot air, dry as it beat on their faces, parching and hard to breathe. With a piece of cotton waste, already oily, in his hands and a sweat breaking out on his forehead, Ben followed Henderson round the iron-grating walks, and side by side with him read the steam and water pressures, filled with a dim happiness, hugging to himself an illusion that this was his ship, that soon he would be watching the telegraph dial and setting all this machinery in action as soon as the long finger moved from STOP.

" Don't know where the Chief is," explained Henderson, " or I'd introduce you. He ought to be aboard by now."

" Having a last drink, I expect," Ben suggested.

" Not likely. He's not that sort."

But Ben was no longer attending. He was sick with frustrate longing for the work he saw around him ; his fingers ached for it, the joints in imagination crooking themselves round piston-rods and pump-controls, the tips quivering to feel the touch of levers and oiled shafts ; his mind yearned to master and understand and control all the complicated operations which would waken this machinery from its lethargy and send a crescendo of power through the length of the ship to the great blades of the screw and churn the water, fast or slow, into creaming turbulence, and so drive the iron shell of the *Benediction* out of dock, into the deep-water channel, and then out to sea.

He was weary of inaction, humiliated and self-

distrustful because his trained powers had been so long unused.

For three years the world had shown no desire for him, and yet here was work he could do, deftly, competently, reliably. He looked round on the complications of metal with a savage, resentful, passionate stare.

3

A voice rang through the lofty iron-walled room, a loud echoing inquiry.

"Mr. Henderson down there?"

They saw a serious, bearded face peering down at them through the rungs of an iron ladder fifteen feet above.

"The mate," whispered Henderson, and then, raising his voice, called back, "What's the matter?"

"Come up here a moment, will you?" The mate's voice was urgent, momentous, secretive.

"You'd better wait in my room," said Henderson. "I won't be more than a minute or two. Help yourself to a drink."

They scaled the staircase, spiral after spiral, Ben following close behind his friend, reluctant to leave the smell of oil and metal and the glare of the furnaces.

In the alleyway, with gusts of air, cold from the night and damp from the sea, blustering through, the mate was waiting.

"Old shipmate o' mine," Henderson explained. "Now what's all the doings?"

The mate shook hands with Ben, but had not a smile. "The Old Man wants to see you right away," he explained to Henderson. They went down the alleyway side by side, their shoulders bumping, and already it

was apparent that the facetiousness had dropped out of Henderson's manner.

It was twenty minutes before he opened the door of his cabin and nodded to Ben. " Pour me out a drink too, will you ? "

He took the glass and drank reflectively, staring hard at a coloured picture of a dancing girl torn from a South American magazine.

" The poor old Chief's dead," he announced. "And to think it's only three hours since I saw him go ashore. He came along here to talk to me about the cylinder head on number two. It's always been a dud. Needs a replacement. And I walked along to the gangway with him. He was going to see the Shore Superintendent about it. And now the poor old b——'s dead."

" But how ? " asked Ben. " Get run over or something ? "

" Nothing so simple. Some drunken devil started a quarrel. Nobody knows what happened exactly, but in the row the Chief got his throat cut. Murder, that's what it is. Not a mile away. Just outside the Super's office. The police got the chap who did it."

" But who is he ? Someone with a grudge ? "

" No one knows. The Old Man got a telephone call just now from the Super himself. He wants us to get away on the next tide, as we'd planned to. He says if we wait, the police'll keep us in the Pool for weeks while they finish their inquiries. The Super's idea is that the Old Man can make a deposition at Barry Docks, if it's necessary. All the Super cares about is our getting away to-night. We've got cargo due in Lisbon next week."

" But good God, there's no sense in it ! Was he boozing, this Chief of yours ? I thought you said he wasn't that sort ? '

" He wasn't. Sounds to me as if he'd run into a madman. Used a razor. You remember that lascar who flashed a razor in the stokehold on your watch on the old *Esmeralda*? You had to knock him out with a shovel."

" I remember," said Ben. " I shan't forget him in a hurry. He never gave any trouble after that. They just go dotty for a few seconds and then it's all over and they say they're very sorry and they don't remember anything about it."

" It must have been a loony," Henderson decided. " I suppose we'll read all about it in the papers when we reach Barry. Poor old Chief! And I've got his job. I'm the new bloody Chief on this hooker. His first command! Mother, aren't you proud of your boy in his brand new uniform! Talk about dead man's shoes!"

" You mustn't look at it like that," Ben urged: but his thoughts were elsewhere, and while Henderson sat on his bunk and stared with unappreciative startled eyes at the dancing girl, Ben was remembering Peter McCabe, and his recurring curses against a Chief engineer who had " had it in for him." There was a razor too, he'd found in a drawer, and put in his pocket. Of course, it might be only a coincidence. His mind repeated an inquiry three times, but he would not let it reach his lips. He had only to say to Henderson, " Did you sack a greaser this morning? Name of McCabe?" and he would know almost for certain whether Nora's father was a murderer. He could not bring himself to utter the words. He ought to find out, he ought to make sure, because the shock for Nora would be terrible. He ought to hurry away and warn her, prepare her. He ought to be by her side, if this horrible thing was true, if she was going to be impli-

cated, through her father in a murder case with all that must follow, the scandal, the shame, the newspaper reports, the trial threatening her. But if he did not ask that question, if he simply kept his mouth shut, then he could pretend to himself that Nora did not need him, that he was under no obligation to fly to her side, to be her strength in her hour of tribulation. His thoughts were flying away from McCabe and domesticity and Nora. They were leaping and straining at a new prospect, at returning self-respect, at satisfaction for his mind, at comfort for the urgent yearnings in his body, in his feet and his wrists and his skilful fingertips.

"Henderson!" he said intently. And repeated, "Henderson, listen to me!"

The other started. "Sorry. Were you talking?"

"No. But I want to now. Look here, you're an engineer short on this boat."

"So we are. I hadn't thought of that. We'll have to do extra watches till we get to Barry."

"No, you needn't. What about me?"

Henderson stared at him. "But you don't want to ship as my junior? Man, I wouldn't think of it."

"I want a job. I'm sick of being on the shore. Now what about it?"

"But we're due to sail before midnight."

"I'll soon get my things aboard. I've got digs not half an hour away."

"You mean it?"

"By God I do!"

Henderson stood up. "You won't think I'm coming it on you if I give the orders?"

"Don't worry. You're the Chief. I'll never let you down."

"All right. I'll go and see the Old Man right away."

Ten minutes later he was back again. " Come on. The Old Man's going to cut out the Barry call. We run straight for Lisbon. He'll sign you on right away."

4

They came out of the cinema and, turning away from the lights, walked through the rain up Copperas Hill, and between the dull-red iron sides of the railway bridge, glistening with running water, to wait for a tram in London Road. A bus came, but they let it go. The fares were too high.

" What a marvellous hotel ! " reflected Mrs. McCabe. " When Joan Crawford leaned over that balcony and looked down ! It made me quite dizzy. But fancy a girl doing that sort of thing ! Picking up a man she'd hardly seen, and taking off her clothes in the next room. I always said a lot of those typists are fast hussies. But she's pretty, Joan Crawford. Great big eyes she's got."

" I'd rather have Greta Garbo any day," Nora replied.

The tram came up and they climbed on.

" Better go on top. We'll have to stand all the way if we go inside. I wish we'd seen more of her."

" Greta Garbo, you mean ? My word, Nora, I did like that frilly frock of hers ? Did you ever see that foreign dancer, what's her name, Pavlova, do the Swan dance ? You know, the one where the swan dies and she flutters her arms and falls down all in a heap, and the music gets quieter and quieter, and her head falls, and you know she's dead. That used to make me cry, that did. I saw it once at the old Empire, with your father. He didn't much care for it, I remember."

" Don't let's talk about him."

" But, Nora, suppose he's waiting there when we get home ? "

" He won't be. And anyhow it won't help to talk about it."

" Oh, my goodness, I never give it a thought! Connie! Suppose she's got home already and her father's waiting for her? It'd be a terrible shock. She'd never get over it."

Nora laughed. " Connie won't be home for hours yet. You ought to know her habits by now. So stop worrying. What did you think of Wallace Beery?"

" Was that the man who killed the other chap, the prince who turned out to be a crook? My dear, what a face! And his neck! Did you see the rolls of fat on it? A married man, too. They do show you some funny things on the pictures these days, I must say. But they'll never make me believe a nice-looking girl like that would pick up a man of that sort, and make herself cheap for him. Not a man with a great fat neck like that!"

" He's no worse to look at than Maurice Bruno."

" Oh, Nora, how can you say such a thing! Why, Maurice is quite handsome. Yes, he is. Different sort of fellow altogether to that Beery creature. Beery by name and beery by nature, I daresay, if the truth was known."

" Anyway," said Nora, " he's not greasy, like Maurice."

" You're jealous, that's what you are. And you ought to be ashamed of yourself. After all, it was Maurice who gave us the tickets for to-night."

" And did I want to take them? I'd never have come but for . . . for that man turning up like that."

They both sat in silence, side by side, on the swaying tram seat, under the glare of the unshaded electric lamps in an atmosphere filled with the sour stench of damp clothing and cheap tobacco, until the tram came

to the nearest point to their home that it reached. They descended and walked, still in silence, towards the shore, where the wind from the river met them, boisterous and streaked with the downslant of the rain. Their thoughts were on Peter McCabe, and at every step they expected to see his figure take shape out of the gloom, his mocking face thrust close to theirs, and to hear his voice, insinuating, or hearty, or hoarse with imprecations.

He was not in the street, however, nor on the stairs nor on the landing. Nora took the key from her mother's trembling fingers and opened the door, locking it immediately behind her. Something rustled under her feet as she stepped inside. She lighted the gas.

" There, what did I tell you ! " she cried to hearten her mother. " There's no one here ! " Her mother, stooping down, rose with a face drawn and pale, a folded piece of paper in her hand.

" It's from him ! I'm sure it is ! "

" Here, give me that." Nora snatched the pencilled note away, and her anxious face smoothed at once. " Not a bit of it. This is from Ben, this is."

" Oh, that's all right." Mrs. McCabe sat down heavily in the armchair. " It give me quite a turn."

" Just listen, Ma. Ben's got a ship. He's signed on. Third engineer. He's got to sail to-night. To-night ! He'll have gone by now, and I haven't said good-bye to him."

" Does he say how long he'll be away ? "

" About three weeks."

" Oh, that's nothing. Well, my dear, it's the best bit of news we've had for I don't know how long."

" But fancy my being at the cinema to-night ! If only I'd had the sense to stay at home, I might have seen him off. It's all the fault of that Maurice Bruno,

flashing his tickets around. Wanting to show us he's got money to throw away. Never mind, Ben'll have money now."

"Of course," said Mrs. McCabe, "he won't ever make as much as Maurice."

"Ben's steady anyhow. And he's going to marry me. That's more than Connie can say about that Maurice Bruno of hers!"

"It must have been when Ben went down to the docks to see if he could find out about your father that he got this job. It just shows you that you never know when your luck's going to turn, Nora. If only Connie would come home, I'd be quite happy. We could bolt the door then and go to sleep. Nora, you don't think he could be upstairs in one of the bedrooms?"

Mrs. McCabe began to shiver.

"If he is, I'll turn him out. And if he won't go, I'll fetch a policeman. But don't worry. He's far away by now. I don't suppose we'll ever see him again."

"Yes, but just suppose?"

"I'll go and have a look," said Nora wearily, "if that'll put your mind at rest. Give the fire a poke, will you? And make some cocoa. I'm cold."

She took a box of matches and went out on to the landing. Her heart leaped in her breast and sickened her when she thrust the key towards the lock and found the door already open. But when she lighted the gas in her mother's room, there was no one there. The lock on the door had been forced. It was wrenched outwards to the full length of the screws.

A light was showing in the next room, her own room, but when she threw the door open there was only Connie there, reading in bed by the light of a candle.

"Have you seen him?" Nora asked, her uneasy breath making her voice quaver.

" Who ? "

" Father, of course."

Connie sat up in bed, her red hair touselled over her face.

" What on earth are you talking about ? Gone dippy since I saw you last ? "

Nora explained as well as she could that their father had returned that evening. Connie whistled at the news.

" Blasted cheek ! " was her first comment. Then, a moment later, while Nora was still describing his appearance and the part Ben had played in turning him out, " That settles it. Ma must apply for a separation to-morrow."

" But why did you break the door open ? " Nora asked.

" I didn't. I found it like that. At first I thought there must have been a burglar. Fancy anyone burgling us ! Then I saw there was nothing missing, so I didn't know what to think. I went to bed. Couldn't sleep though."

" Did you have a good time ? "

" Sure. Dinner in an hotel and dancing."

" You're home early ? "

" I got tired."

Nora began to smile. " That's not the only news ! "

" Isn't it ? Enough for one night, anyhow."

" No, listen." Nora sat down on the edge of the bed. " Ben's got a ship. He's sailed to-night. It all happened so sudden I hadn't time to see him off."

" Good for old Ben ! "

Connie stared at her sister with a flickering smile in eyes that seemed bright, metallically bright, with no depths to them. Then, abruptly, her face softened, she pulled her sister's head down to her, and kissed her with warm, almost feverish kisses.

" I'm ever so glad," she whispered. " You deserve it. Both of you. You'll get married now, won't you ? "

" Not quite yet," said Nora, blushing. " But soon."

On the floor below them they heard a measured knock, loud and deliberate, and then the sound of the door opening.

A strange voice, a man's voice, deep and clear, spoke, and every word came up to the two girls listening in apprehensive silence.

" Are you Mrs. Peter McCabe ? Sorry to disturb you, ma'am, at this time o' night. I'd be very glad if you'd answer a few questions."

Connie swung her legs out of bed and the sisters flew to the door and out on to the landing. In the light from the open parlour door they saw, below them, grotesquely foreshortened, the dark blue of a policeman's helmet and uniform.

Side by side they ran down the stairs, and followed the constable into the room.

" Connie," said Mrs. McCabe, " you'll put a coat round you at once. Catch your death of cold, you will. Besides, it's not decent."

" There's one here," said Nora, still responsive to Connie's affection, and hurried into the kitchen.

As she came back, the constable, now seated on the sofa, was asking, " Was your husband, ma'am, employed on a ship called the *Benediction* ? "

" What did you say ? What name ? " cried Nora.

" The *Benediction.*"

" I've no idea what was the name of his ship," said Mrs. McCabe. " Put your coat on, Connie, at once."

The constable looked from one to other of them, bewildered.

" It's all right, it's all right," said Nora. " Go on."

There was no sleep for any of them, all through the

long hours of that night. Nora lay beside her mother in the narrow bed, winding her arms round her, hopelessly trying to supply strength and consolation she lacked herself. It was Connie who rose first and made breakfast, and brought it to them with gentle, careful hands.

CHAPTER XI

OLD TIMES

I

MRS. MCCABE hardly knew how to deal with Mrs. Morris, who was always coming upstairs with her tears and her sympathy and her offer of queer Jewish foods, greasy titbits which Mrs. McCabe laid aside and took out privately and threw away. She could not hurt Mrs. Morris's feelings. Although the plump Jewess was obviously regretting that she had been away from home with her rich relatives that fatal day of Peter McCabe's return, her sympathy was genuine. She alone of all the housewives in the building did not seem to think that Mrs. McCabe had brought disgrace on them all. A photograph of the house had appeared in two of the Sunday papers, and although Mrs. Duncan and Mrs. Simon kept folded copies to show to their friends, with loud protestations of disgust and resentment, they would not now speak to Mrs. McCabe and her daughters. They were often to be seen at the front door, talking together with their eyes sharp with excitement and their mouths writhing into fantastic shapes as the words jostled out pell-mell; but when one of the McCabes appeared, even George Alexander, they fell silent and averted their eyes. The Duncans and the Simons were so united against the McCabes that Mrs. Gibson, the deplorable and disreputable Mrs. Gibson, was now permitted to chat with them. There was no doubt what they talked about.

"They're a lot of cats, that's what they are!" Mrs. Morris declared.

" Anyone would think from the way they carry on," said Connie, " the murder was done on their own doorstep. After all, even if a man's fool enough to do what Father did, his family's still got to live somewhere, haven't they ? "

Mrs. Morris was a nuisance, forever knocking at the door and saying, " I just thought you might like a bit of this, my dear," and wanting to pat Mrs. McCabe's hand, but she meant well. It was the men who knocked and wanted to ask questions about Peter and take her photograph who worried her. They weren't rude, not half so bad as you'd been led to expect, and of course, as one of them said, a lot of people would give a pile of money to get their photographs in the paper. There was one man who wanted her to sign a form, and he said an article would appear in the paper, " My Life with Peter McCabe, by His Wife." He said she needn't write a word, just talk to him for half an hour, and the paper would pay her fifty pounds. Fifty pounds, no less ! That was putting temptation in a poor working woman's way, if you like. No wonder she didn't know what answer to make, so she said she'd think it over, and that same night told Nora and Connie about it.

" Go on, Ma," Connie urged. " You take it. We'll never get another chance like this. Fifty quid for talking to a chap for half an hour ! "

" But Connie, the disgrace of it ! It would be an awful common thing to do. Besides, your father's in enough trouble. I couldn't go writing about him in a Sunday paper."

" It won't hurt him," Nora observed. " And God knows he owes us a bit. Fifty pounds ! Why, on that, we could move right away from here to some place where no one knows us."

" Think of all the clothes we could buy," said

Connie. " Why, Ma, you could have a real fur coat. And still leave lots over. They've got 'em as low as five guineas in the Fur Department."

" Yes," sniffed Nora, " and if you ask me they're not even real rabbit ! But I don't see why you shouldn't, Ma. All kinds of people write about themselves for the papers, countesses and baronets, and no one thinks any the worse of them for it. We're disgraced now, anyhow. It'll take us long enough to live this down, if we ever do. Thank goodness, *I* shall be changing my name."

" That's one thing I'm thankful for," said her mother, " you getting married at last."

Connie thought : Nora hasn't heard a word from Ben since he went away. Suppose, when he finds out . . . ? Maurice hadn't been near the place since, either, but then he often had to go away on business, and he never was any good at writing letters.

Nora summed up the discussion. " In for a penny, in for a pound, that's what I say. You mustn't tell this reporter chap anything you don't want to, of course. But if they've got fifty pounds to chuck away, I think we're as much entitled to it as anyone."

So when the newspaper man came back the next night, Nora was waiting for him with her mother.

" Ah, I thought you'd change your mind," he said. " Now don't you get worried, ma'am. I'm not going to ask you any questions that'll upset you. I just want a few little homely particulars, and a photograph or two. I'm afraid it'll only be thirty quid now, though. You see, if you'd agreed on the spot, I could have got you fifty. But news has got to be red hot or else it is no good to anyone. The office wouldn't stand for fifty now. Why, there may be another murder before we go to press on Saturday."

" If that's how you're going to talk," declared Nora, " there's nothing doing."

" Oh, Nora, don't be rash. Thirty pounds is a lot of money."

" Not to a newspaper. They're rolling in it. Look at the gifts they push at you if you only give them an order for a few weeks ! Encyclopædias, and gramophones and canteens of cutlery and bicycles and I don't know what ! "

" Look here, we'll make it forty. I'll probably get into trouble over this, but never mind. I like to help people. Say forty and make it a deal ? "

" Fifty ! " repeated Nora.

The man smiled. " O.K." He walked to the door, opened it and said, " Come along in, Jim."

A man with a camera-case slung round his shoulders entered, took off his hat and wished them good evening.

On the Friday afternoon Mrs. McCabe signed what they called a " proof," a long article in print you could hardly read, on dirty reddish paper, which told how they lived in " a simple, but neat and tidy home with the roar of the ocean floating in through the windows," and how " my husband " would be away from home for " long, heart-breaking periods working in deadly peril amid tropical storms, but always, I am convinced, thinking of his wife and children far away." " I have two pretty daughters, both earning their own living " : and, " it was a proud day for me when my youngest son, George Alexander, named after the famous actor-manager (who was always a favourite of mine), came home and told me he had won a scholarship to the local secondary school. His father was always very proud of him."

When the paper itself appeared on the Sunday there was not only the article, quite easy to read now, with

big headlines, but a photograph of Mrs. McCabe seated at the tea-table, with cups and saucers and a tea-cosy before her, and the window in the background, showing a view of the river with a great four-funnelled liner with long streams of black smoke coming from each funnel. Connie said they must have painted that on to the photograph, because you could only see the river from the window round a couple of chimneys and there hadn't been any four-funneller there that day, and anyhow it was night when the photograph was taken, and the man had exploded something that made an awful flash and left a nasty stink behind it. There was a photograph of George Alexander too, with his hair plastered down over his forehead, that the reporter had spotted on the mantelshelf and taken away with him.

George Alexander burst into tears when he saw the paper. He said he wouldn't go back to school, it was bad enough already, with boys asking him questions about his father, and the masters looking at him over the tops of their glasses. Now that his mother had made them all cheap in a Sunday paper and given them his photograph too, his life wouldn't be worth living. Nora told him not to be a little fool. If he'd only hold his tongue and show that he didn't care twopence for anybody, he'd be all right. After all, to have his photograph in the paper meant that he must be the most important boy in the school. George Alexander stopped crying and said there might be something in that, but he wished his father had never come home, he wished he'd never had a father at all.

"When you grow up a bit," said Connie, "you'll learn that doesn't happen often."

"What do you mean?" the boy asked. "Fathers never coming home? Does it happen to a lot of chaps? I wish it had happened to me."

" No," said Connie, " I just meant that fathers are necessary evils." She grinned at Nora, who decided her sister was being vulgar, and turned away. " Perhaps you'll be a father yourself some day," Connie added.

" Oh, Connie," her mother cried, " how can you say such things ! "

" I think girls are lousy," said George Alexander, and took his homework up to his bedroom.

" It's all right, Ma," Connie explained. " He only means he doesn't like them. And that won't last long either. You'll know when he changes his opinions about girls. He'll start to buy brilliantine, and he'll come out in pimples."

" I don't know how you can make jokes at a time like this. It doesn't show a very nice feeling. Why, your father may be . . ." She began to fumble inside her blouse for a handkerchief.

2

She hadn't told the newspaper man anything about that razor, and the police never mentioned it either, thank goodness. To think she had kept it all these years, and then Peter to come back and take it away and go out and kill a man with it. Somehow, it upset her more than anything to think that she'd had the keeping of the awful thing. She remembered just what it looked like : its bone handle going yellow, and the case worn at one corner, so that the cardboard stuff underneath showed through the black. Funny, heavy sort of blade —think of it going into that poor man's throat, and the blood coming out ! You often read about that sort of thing, but it never came home to you, until you knew that you had many a time held the very same razor in your own hands. She felt she was connected with the murder through that horrible razor, not through Peter.

She kept telling herself it wasn't him that did it. He wasn't cruel, really. All the years of her married life he'd never struck her, not once. He talked a lot about it, but he'd never hit her. Even when he'd give Nora or Connie a clout, when they were kids, before he went away, it wasn't what you'd call a hard clout. He'd make their ears sing, but he'd never leave a bruise. He must have been mad drunk that night. Couldn't have known what he was doing. And surely that meant he wasn't himself, so the judge couldn't . . . ? Or perhaps he'd had a brain storm? Anyhow, she could never feel it was Peter who'd done a thing like that. No, it was the razor she couldn't get out of her mind.

She'd kept it locked up for years, while George Alexander was still a baby, but she'd lost the key, and when he got his scholarship and started going to school and learning Latin and French, it didn't seem to matter. She couldn't remember when she began to keep it in that drawer in the kitchen, along with Peter's tobacco-box—such an old-fashioned thing, you never saw them nowadays. Perhaps that was what made it appeal to her? She'd never been able to think that a man who used a safety-razor was a real man, somehow. Why, Connie used a sort of one to take the hair off her armpits, when she was going to a dance. Only, of course, they were safer. She'd never forget the start she got when she saw George Alexander using that razor of Peter's one day to sharpen a pencil with. She was scared to death he'd cut himself with it, and she had the sense not to shout or try to snatch it from him. She'd just said, in a very quiet, strong voice, " George Alexander, you'll put that down at once ! " After that she'd meant to take the thing upstairs and keep it in her own room the way she used to, but the boy had never opened the case again, and somehow she forgot. If she hadn't

left it there, Peter would never have found it, and then he'd never have been able to go for that poor man. In a way, it was all her fault.

The number of times, too, she'd thought of throwing it away, or maybe trying to sell it for a few shillings. Ben always said it was a good razor, though it wanted attention, and it was marvellous it hadn't gone rusty. German it was. If only she had sold the horrible thing! She hadn't liked to part with everything of Peter's and he'd taken all the rest, pretty well, with him, that last time he cleared out and left a message for her with Nora at school. And she was carrying George Alexander then, though she didn't know it. Funny he should leave his razor and his tobacco-box behind. She'd come in from her shopping and found his hat and his coat gone, and his bag, too. Even his dirty shirts. But next day, when she came to clean the overmantel, there was the razor and the tobacco-box next to the vase from Llandudno on one of the little shelves. He must have put them there to pack them, and then forgot, hurrying to get out of the place before she returned.

But it was her fault for keeping them. She ought to have known better. You might almost say she'd put the razor into his hand, and then turned him out of his own home. It was her not wanting to sleep with him made him mad. Men were funny that way. Of course, it wasn't reasonable of him to stay away all those years, and then come home and expect her to. As if he'd just been round the corner to buy a paper. A woman has her feelings. But she knew it was that which sent him out to booze himself blind. She'd done everything wrong she possibly could. She'd driven him to it, and left the razor where he couldn't help but find it.

Peace of mind, even the profound acceptance of heartbreak, escaped Mrs. McCabe. An accumulation of fourteen years' absence had removed her husband beyond reach of striking her mortally. She felt sorry for him, sorry for herself, sorry for her children, but some inner strength held off the worst onslaught of this catastrophe. It could bewilder her, but she thought of it always as something which would pass. The brief contact she had had with her husband on the evening of his homecoming had done little to unfold the shrivelled husk of her affection. He came out of oblivion, a figure she remembered knowing much more intimately long ago, but distasteful, painful to contemplate. He returned unwanted and bereft of the power to affect her inmost heart.

The news that this man, who had been her husband and seemed so no longer, had committed a murder shocked her, dazed her, made her mind numb. From this numbness it awoke gradually into a state of muddled agitation. Memories and perceptions and self-reproaches and self-justifications jigged and jostled irrelevantly up and down and round about, and repeated themselves tiresomely, through her always confused and unintellectual thoughts, until she was in an agony of indecision and bewilderment. Underneath this mental chaos, a forgotten life which was part of her personality, part of her experience, although it was rarely glimpsed by her mind, now began to stir again. She could feel it dimly, like heat and cold, like pressures and cramps, like muscular ease or nervous distress, transforming her on those obscure and unlocalized marches where that aspect of Mary McCabe which was not body imperceptibly yielded to that aspect which was.

A funny thing, seeing she was his wedded wife, that she always seemed to remember him in a bowler hat. He'd worn one at the wedding; the first "blocker" he'd ever had. Bought it specially for the occasion, and he'd put it on as soon as they were outside the chapel door, pushing it down at a slant over one eye. As soon as they got inside the cab she'd said to him, "Oh, Peter, you do look queer in that hat," and he'd said, "What's the matter with it anyhow?" "Take it off for mercy's sake!" That was what she'd answered him. She remembered the very words. But he wouldn't. Not him. He'd pulled her over, even though the cab had hardly got away from the kerb and people could see, and kissed her, and the brim of his hat had hurt her, jabbing into her forehead. Not that she had minded then.

That was the time to be happy, when you were married and for just a bit after. It was never the same again. Of course she'd been simple. All girls were simple in those days. Nora and Connie wouldn't take it like that. They knew a thing or two. They knew too much, she couldn't help thinking at times. Still, perhaps the less you expected when you got married, the less you were liable to be disappointed. Connie wouldn't have to work and scrape and worry the way she had, anyhow, if she got Maurice Bruno. And Ben was steady. An officer, too. Her girls had done well for themselves. That was one comfort.

It must be different to have a husband you could rely on, who'd do things without having to be told all the time. Somehow, even from the first, Peter had been like a child for her to look after. He didn't mean to do her any harm, but he was always getting into trouble. Couldn't control himself. He'd be sorry afterwards,

though he'd never admit it, but she always knew it was his way of saying he was sorry when he came along and laid his head on her shoulder. He wanted her to put her arms round him then. She knew well enough. She knew all his little ways.

It used to be the same when he came to bed. Funny, she hadn't thought about that sort of thing for years. Wouldn't let herself. Better not to. What you've never had, you never miss, or so they say. And what you can't have is better out of mind. Only, she'd always felt she was giving something to him, as if he was a child of hers. Often, when he had his head down on her breast, snuggling there and kissing her with his soft sleepy kisses, she'd found herself thinking of him as her baby. Of course, it wasn't right and proper, but she couldn't help it. And he was so tired and sleepy afterwards. It was just like giving a baby its bottle and tucking it up in its pram.

What a sight a man was in his shirt and nothing else! She ought not by rights to think of such things. She hadn't for years, only Peter coming home like that brought it all back. Funny bony knees he had. They used to stick into her back sometimes, when he was asleep and dreaming. Men weren't nice to look at, the way women were. All those hairs on their legs. Ugly, really. But then new-born babies were ugly, too, only you got fond of them, and they made you want to take them up and cuddle them. Men were always wanting, and their bony bodies lying up against you, so funny and hot, and the way the strength rose in them. They didn't know what they were doing then, and you couldn't put them off. And you felt all gentle and kind afterwards, when you knew they were comforted and satisfied. It was the way they were made. They couldn't help it. And you liked having a man, just like you

wanted children round the house, even if they were a bother and a responsibility, and always hungry, too. Just imagine it all coming back to her like this. She must have been missing poor Peter all along.

5

Nora would be a different girl once she was married. Of course she didn't know what was ailing her, but at her age she ought to have been married long ago. Things weren't what they used to be, when a girl got married before she was twenty as like as not, and had her baby nine months later. No doubt it was better now, though there didn't seem enough men to go round. It was getting bad even before the war, and ever since it was just about twice as hard for a girl to get herself fixed up with a decent young fellow. All this unemployment too. Not that there'd ever been any doubt in her mind over Nora and Connie. Men would have to be all struck blind and cracked if they overlooked two well set-up, neat, clever girls like that. Pretty, too. Especially Connie. Bound to get married, the pair of them. And Connie ought to be really well off when she was Mrs. Bruno. Funny name for a girl to have, but there, you couldn't expect everything.

To think of Ben getting a ship as sudden as that. Going off at a moment's notice, as you might say. But it would put heart into him, and he deserved it. You'd go a long way before you met as quiet and civil-spoken a young man as Ben. He'd make Nora a good husband, all right. Not exciting, maybe. But at any rate she'd never have to worry about him, wondering where he was, and if he was telling her lies. Or waiting for the pubs to shut, so he'd come home. Pity those engineer officers didn't wear their uniforms ashore. Ben would look fine with Nora on his arm, walking in the Park on

Sunday or along the front at Waterloo. But even on the ship they wore greasy sort of reach-me-downs, Nora said. Still, the money was good, and Ben was steady. He'd come home every time his ship was in port, and Nora would never have to worry about the rent.

A very different sort of life she'd have had if things had been different, if Peter had been steadier, or if he hadn't cleared out the way he did. If the money had only been coming in regular, every week. No working herself to the bone and going round with a bag to the cheapest shops on a Saturday night. Once Nora and Connie started working, it hadn't been so bad. But before that, especially when George Alexander was on the way! She'd been proper sick about it, when she found out what was going to happen to her. And she knew by then there wasn't going to be any allotment money. Funny to think she hadn't wanted George Alexander a bit. Only, as he was bound to come, she'd hoped it would be a boy. Just for a change. And it was. The worst time of the lot she'd had over him, in that hospital. Never felt safe a minute there. Worse than over the first, Nora. Awful shock it was, the first childbed, when the pains really began. But the last time it was worse really, because you knew what you were in for. And she'd made up her mind she wasn't going to have another baby. And Peter clearing out like that, without a word, and no allotment. Of course, he didn't know the baby was coming. Even now he didn't know there was any George Alexander at all. She'd have to write to him about that, even if she didn't go to the prison and see him. Never mind what the girls said. She'd just have to go. He wasn't a bad sort, when he was sober. He didn't mean any harm really. That was one of the things the girls didn't understand.

CHAPTER XII

DUTY

I

" I've got to go."

" Why ? " Nora demanded.

" I've got to."

" But don't you see, Ma, if you do go and see him you'll get us all properly mixed up in this. It's bad enough as things are. But at least we can say we'd never set eyes on him till he came home that day. Fourteen years without a word from him ! No one could say we were responsible after that. But if you go to that prison, you might just as well be telling the whole world we belong to him."

" But, Nora, he's all alone there. He hasn't got a soul to talk to, not in a friendly way. I know he treated us all bad. But it's him that's in a mess now, not us, and we oughtn't to bear a grudge. He can't do us any more harm."

" Can't he ? Look here, Ma, you've got to think of Connie and me in this. I'm going to get married soon, and I dare say Connie will, too, before long. I've brought enough shame and disgrace on Ben, having a father like that. The least I can do is to keep myself as clear of it all as I can."

" I'm not asking you to come, Nora."

" I wouldn't, anyway. You know that."

" Doesn't he mean anything to you ? I mean, after all, he is your father."

Nora tossed her head. " A fine sort of father to have —and I don't think ! "

" Just the same, blood's thicker than water."

" It's no use, Ma. I can't pretend. If he'd ever been a real father to me, I might feel different about it. But he never was. He left you in the lurch when I was still a kid at school. I didn't even remember him very well. After all, he wasn't home very often even before he left us for good and all, and when he was home there was always trouble. If ever I came back from school and found you crying, I knew what was the matter. Dad's ship had come in. The way he used to sing and shout about the place! I suppose he was drunk. He was always disgracing us. And now he's nothing but a murderer. Yes, he is. What's the good of hiding from plain facts? There's no doubt about who done it. A drunken murderer! And I'm a murderer's daughter. Do you think I like that? Do you think I don't know what the other girls are saying about me at the Store? And Connie, too. What about her? Can't you see she's heartsick over it all? Oh, Ma, I didn't mean to cry. I know it doesn't make it any easier for you. We're all in the same boat. But why did you marry him, why did you marry him? "

Mrs. McCabe stroked her daughter's head. " There, Nora. There now. I never guessed you was taking it so hard. You're so strange, you modern girls. You never let on."

" But what's the good of pretending? " cried Nora. " Here we are all of us going on and smiling at each other and trying to act as if nothing had happened, and only waiting, waiting, waiting for the horrible trial and everything to be over, so's we can forget. And now you want to go and see him, and drag us right into the middle of it. You want to come back here and tell us what Father looks like sitting in a prison cell, and what he said to you and what you said to him."

" I'm sorry, Nora, but you must let me go my own way. I know what's my duty and I'm going to do it."

" Why can't you leave him alone, the way he left you all those years? He's got no call on you. Duty! Your duty's to your children now. Haven't you done enough for him, and got nothing in return, except to be deserted fourteen years and then disgraced at the end of it all? "

" There's Connie," exclaimed Mrs. McCabe in relief, as the door opened. " I'll mash some tea."

2

" I could do with it," said Connie, sitting heavily on the sofa and dragging off her hat with a weary gesture.

" You're late, aren't you? " Nora asked. " I've been home half an hour."

" I was talking to the Advertising Manager," explained Connie. " He showed me those photographs he took of you. You wouldn't know your daughter, Ma. Straight, I couldn't believe my own eyes."

" And why," demanded Nora, " couldn't he show them to me? "

" Oh, you'll see 'em to-morrow, he says. He's going to give you some spare copies for yourself."

" But what was he doing with you? " her mother asked.

" Oh, nothing wrong, don't you worry. He's not that sort. Besides there's glass all round his office. I went up to see him just before half-past six. We had a long talk."

" What about? "

Connie's eyes were mocking, but strangely uneasy, ashamed. " The fact is, I got the sack to-day. Leastways, I'm suspended."

" Oh, Connie McCabe, whatever have you been doing ? "

" Not my fault this time. Even the Staff Manager admitted that, and his heart's about as soft as a brick."

" But what's the matter ? "

" Now don't you worry. I'm going to come out of this all right. If you want to blame anyone, you can blame my father for bringing disgrace on us all."

" Come on," said Nora. " Tell us what happened."

" Well, this afternoon, I was doing a perm, the last of the day. A woman I've often had before, though not what you'd call a regular. Full-length hair, takes time, but it's rather coarse, so you don't have to be careful specially. Middle-aged woman—you know ! Not half so high-class as she thinks she is. Well, I'd got all the heaters fixed and she was cooking nicely, so I asked her if she'd like a cup of tea. She knew that cost her nothing, so you bet she said ' Yes.' I believe she even said ' Yes, please ! ' When I got back to the cubicle with the cup and saucer in my hand, there was the charge-hand—I've told you before what a spiteful cat she is, always interfering—and I near dropped the tea on the floor when I saw what she was doing. She'd taken off one of my heaters, if you please, and there she was re-setting it. ' I don't think you had this one quite right, Miss McCabe,' she says, with her nasty sweet smile. ' Oh, don't you, Miss Evans ? ' I answered her like lightning. ' Well, if you're not satisfied with my work, I'll be pleased to do it over again, but I'll do it myself, thank you.' I took care to be polite. But she said, ' You'd better be careful, Miss McCabe.' And then I saw the customer's face in the mirror, with her mouth gaping open. Proper fool she looked I must say, with a great hole of a mouth under all those heaters. Of course, no woman looks her best having a perm,

and she wasn't much to start with. No wonder they won't allow any men in our department."

" Oh, Connie, don't say you made a scene ? "

" No, Ma, I didn't. It was the customer. All of a sudden, she lets out a scream. ' McCabe, did you say ? McCabe ? ' That's what she yelled, top of her voice. They must have heard it in all the other cubicles. ' That's the name of that awful murderer. Don't tell me you're any relation of his, young woman ? ' That's what she called me—young woman. And like a fool, instead of telling a lie, I just stood and stared at her. The fact of the matter is, I was a bit upset. I don't mind admitting it. And then she let out another yell. ' Yes, you are,' she screams, ' I can see the resemblance. And you've had your horrible hands on my hair.' That's what she said, and she didn't whisper it either. I lost my temper then. ' My hands are as good as yours,' I said, ' and I'm not responsible for anything my father's done.' ' Your father ! ' she says, and I think she'd liked to have fainted then, only she was all tied up with the wires. I switched the current off for safety's sake. Not that I'd have cared if the woman'd been electrocuted. And Evans pushed me out of the cubicle and sent another girl along to finish the perm."

" Good God," said Nora, " that means my job's gone too, I suppose ? "

Connie shook her head. " I don't think so. They made me go and put my hat and coat on, and go along to the Staff Office. Mr. Raymond cleared everyone else out of the room before he spoke to me. He wasn't bad. He talked all about the interests of the firm, and them not being able to afford scenes or have people gossiping about the Store. Even said he was sorry for me. But he'd have to suspend me till further notice."

" That's the same as the sack," was Nora's immediate comment. " Might take you on temporary at sale times and Christmas. That won't help much."

" Just you wait a minute. I was going home, fed up, when I had an idea. So I went along to the seventh floor and walked into the Advertising Department as cool as you please. And when I came to the Advertising Manager's office, I peeped over the screen, through the glass, and there he was sitting at his desk, signing letters. When he looked up, I gave him a smile, one of my very best, and he looked a bit surprised, but when I pointed to the door, he understood, and I could see he was saying, ' Come in.' So in I went and he stood up. Like one of those old-fashioned gentlemen with white hair you see at the cinema. The Lewis Stone sort. And he made me sit down, and I told him all about it, and he seemed to understand exactly how I felt. I said I couldn't afford to be out of a job and it wasn't my fault. I said we'd all suffered enough as it is. And then he said he'd got an idea. He said it wasn't likely they could keep you and me on here, but if we could move to Nottingham or Bristol, he'd try to fix it so we got taken on in the Store there. Same firm, you know. He seemed to think it would be wiser if they gave us another name in the Store, the way they do when a new girl comes and there's already a girl on the staff with the same name."

" Oh," exclaimed Mrs. McCabe, " we couldn't leave Liverpool ! I never thought of such a thing. I don't know a soul in those places."

" You don't suppose I want to go away, do you ? " Connie flashed at her.

" You mean, having Maurice here ? "

" And what about me and Ben ? " Nora demanded. " But we may have to. Is it settled yet, Connie ? "

" Course not. The Advertising Manager's going to let me know. But don't worry. He'll arrange it. Have you ever seen him arguing ? He could talk the hind leg off a donkey. He'll get his own way all right."

" He seems a kind man, anyway," sighed Mrs. McCabe. " But I never thought of moving out of Liverpool. I've lived here all my life."

" I don't know," reflected Nora aloud. " It mightn't be a bad idea to get right away where no one knows us."

" There's another thing," said Connie. " The Advertising Manager won't be putting your photographs into the Store magazine."

" I thought you said they came out well ? "

" So they did. But it's the same reason I got the sack. People might recognise you and talk. And that wouldn't do the Store any good. We both got the name of McCabe, see, and it's not popular just now."

" Ma," said Nora, " I wish you'd pour me a cup of that tea."

3

When Connie had eaten and was ready to light a cigarette, Nora announced, " Ma's been keeping on at me. She wants to go and see him in prison. I wish you'd talk to her."

" It's no use you talking, either of you. I've made up my mind."

" It'll only make you miserable," said Connie.

" I'm not going to please myself. I'm going because it's my duty."

" And what about his duty to you ? And us ? He managed to forget all about that for fourteen years, didn't he ? "

" That's different. He's in trouble. He needs me."

" I think you flatter yourself," Nora spoke with bitterness that hardened her face, made her eyes brighter and her lips paler. " He doesn't need anyone in the world, except himself. He was born selfish."

Her mother kept her patience. " You don't understand."

" He hasn't even asked you to go. That proves he doesn't want you."

" I don't suppose the police would let him write."

" Of course, they would," cried Nora. " Couldn't stop him. He hasn't been tried yet."

" Well, I daresay he's feeling too ashamed of himself. And lonely."

" You're sentimental, that's what you are. You're sloppy about him, just because he was your husband once. And that was so long ago you've almost forgotten."

" Indeed, I haven't."

" It's women like you," Nora continued, " that's always letting their own sex down. You get so soft about a man you'll let him do anything to you, walk over you. Connie and me want to be kept out of this. She's lost her job and I daresay I'll lose mine when I go to clock-in to-morrow morning. All because of that man who means nothing to us. We've stuck by you all these years, when he didn't worry his head whether you were alive or dead. Fat lot he cared if we starved, the lot of us. Not a word and not a penny from him. Then he comes home and gets drunk—as usual !—and brings disgrace on the whole family. Murderer's daughter ! That's what that woman called Connie, and that's what we are, both of us. We've got to clear out of Liverpool. Of course we have. The sooner the better. And lucky to have the money to do it and jobs to go to. All because of a man who might as well

be a stranger to us ! And you want to go and weep tears over him and hold his hand ! "

" Oh, give over," said Connie. " After all, Ma isn't asking us to go with her. I wish she wouldn't, but after all it's her look-out."

" God ! What a man to be sloppy about ! "

Connie laughed. " That's what's biting you, is it? Just because *you're* never likely to lose your head over anyone."

Mrs. McCabe stood up. Her lips were quivering. " After all, he's your father, and I'm not going to let you talk about him like that. It isn't right. It isn't decent."

Connie's sneer had made Nora lose control of herself, but it was on her mother that she vented her wrath. With tears in her eyes, she said vehemently, " All right. I wasn't going to tell you. I didn't want to hurt you. But I see I've got to. Do you know where that precious father of mine went to, that night when he walked out of this room ? "

" Oh," interrupted Connie, " we're not shocked if he did go to a pub. That's an old habit of his."

" Pub ? Nothing so innocent. He went downstairs, to Mrs. Gibson. To Mrs. Gibson, I tell you. That harlot ! Right underneath here. That's where he went. She told me herself, the filthy, weepy-eyed bitch. Pretending to apologize, while all the time she was looking at me to see how I was taking it. Gloating over me, and gloating over you too ! "

" She must have been lying ! "

" What for ? It wouldn't do her any good to lie, would it ? And it's not the first time she's had a man there, as we all know. That's where he went. Straight from you to her, Ma. That's why she was singing when we went out to the pictures. And now perhaps you'll

stop breaking your heart over him."

" You've no right to be talking about such things," said Mrs. McCabe. " An unmarried girl like you ! And your own father, too ! "

" You don't mean to say you'll go and see him after that ? "

" I will. I don't believe anything that woman says. And if it is true, I'll have it from his own lips. Don't fret. I shan't lose my dignity. I'm not so soft as you think, Nora. But I know what my duty is, and I'm going to do it."

" Oh, you're mad ! "

Nora's eyes were wide with dismay.

" I'm going up to bed now. You've tired me. Turn the gas out and lock the doors before you go."

" Good night, Ma," said Connie, and surprised her mother by kissing her ; but Nora sat with downcast eyes and said nothing.

CHAPTER XIII

DESIRES

1

"WHAT did you want to say that for?" Connie demanded as soon as the door was closed.

"I had to."

"No, you hadn't. She'll cry all night now."

"Better to know the truth, anyway," Nora retorted. 'Just because you were ashamed for her to go to the prison!"

"You said you felt the same way about it. Only this morning you said so."

"Yes, but I didn't know Ma was so set on going."

"She's sloppy. She treats him as if he were a little kid."

"That's what men are like!"

"My Ben isn't, so shut up!"

They sat in the parlour, Connie at the table before the uncleared relics of supper, tilting her chair back and puffing cigarette smoke around her, Nora on the sofa under the window, and each receded separately into the privacy of reflection.

2

Nora was astonished as well as ashamed by the way she had struck at her mother's delicacy and pride. She had intended never to disclose to anyone what Mrs. Gibson had told her, but now that it was out she was aware, obscurely and uncomfortably, that the disclosure had yielded her satisfaction. There was a pleasure in such pain, a queer delight which made

the corners of her mouth itch to snicker back in a grin whenever she thought of it. Yet she truly grieved for her mother. The irreverent, secretive, exciting impulse which had seized on her, while her resentment was rising hot against Connie, and spilled out horrible words (still reverberating in her ears and making them burn) complicated her sorrow and remorse. Her body quivered with an aching unease which, without admitting it, she felt to be shameful. It did not diminish until she began to think of Ben.

He must know by now about her father, for he had joined the same ship her father had left. That was why he had got the job, of course. It was the Chief Engineer that her father had killed, and so there had been a vacancy. You might almost say her father had *made* a job for Ben. That was a horrible way of putting it, but anyway it had done Ben a good turn. It was about all she had to thank her father for. Her mother and Connie didn't know yet that Ben was on the *Benediction*, and she wasn't going to tell them. They'd find out soon enough. She had realized the moment that policeman let out the name. At first she had thought it was just chance, what they called a coincidence. And then afterwards, in the middle of the night, while her mother was lying in her arms, and neither of them able to get a wink of sleep, she had thought to herself: So that's why Ben got the job!

Of course, he wouldn't know himself at the time it was her father had cut that poor man's throat. Just as well he didn't know, or else he'd have wanted to turn the job down and stay by her in her trouble. Much better for him to be in work. Three years he had been waiting for a chance like that. Funny for it to come that way! He wouldn't find out it was her father till they got to sea, and the officers started discussing the busi-

ness. And *they* wouldn't know Ben was going to marry the murderer's daughter. Fancy that woman shouting it out loud all over the hairdressing cubicles! Ben wouldn't let on, of course. Much wiser to say nothing. Maybe they didn't know on the ship who did it? They'd get English newspapers at Lisbon, though, and they'd find it all out then. She wondered how long they'd stay in Lisbon. Ben said they were due at Hull after that. Only you never knew with ships.

It wouldn't be easy for Ben. A nasty shock. If they did move to Bristol, his boat might put in there quite often. And all those Welsh places, Cardiff and Newport and Barry, were quite close. She'd keep on working in the Store there, if they'd let her, after they were married. For a bit anyway. It would help them to gather some furniture round them. Only she mustn't have her baby too late. They said it was dangerous to have your first baby when you were past thirty. That gave her a couple of years, if they got married right away. Perhaps after Ben's next voyage, when all the trouble was over and they'd moved out of Liverpool? It might be wiser not to say anything in the Store about getting married. They might want to sack her. After all, it wasn't anybody's business but hers, and Ben's.

3

Connie, apart in the privacy of her own thoughts, could not make up her mind about Maurice Bruno. Not so long ago, before *that* happened in that bungalow place, she thought she had him taped. She thought she knew just where she was with him, what she wanted, what she could get, and how to get it. And now she wasn't so sure. She didn't even know if she liked him so much. And why hadn't he come near her, since then?

Not a line from him. Every evening, when she'd come out at the Employees' Entrance, she'd looked to see if his car was waiting there. But it never was. He was like that sometimes, and then he'd turn up again as if he'd never been away. It was a bit awkward if she wasn't going to be at the Store any more. If there wasn't a letter from him in the morning, she'd better telephone him at his office. She'd done that yesterday, and the girl said he was out. It might have been true, but then again it mightn't. That was the worst of telephoning. You never knew whether that office girl was telling you lies and laughing at you as soon as she'd put the receiver down.

Maurice couldn't be just giving her the air? He couldn't! He liked his own way and issuing all the orders, but he was nuts on her all right. He wanted her. But then he'd had her. She had been an utter fool to go to a place like that. And drinking that cocktail after that wine. You might say he'd seduced her. Only there wasn't going to be any scandal. Maurice knew too much to leave her in the family way. He'd been so funny and gentle, apologizing almost, afterwards. Not like him at all. No fear, he wouldn't leave her high and dry. And he'd got his car. He could come and see her when they left Liverpool. That woman making a show of her before all the other girls! She never wanted to go back to the Store, after that. Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea to get married. Needn't go to other people's houses then. It would be funny to sleep in the same bed as Maurice. She'd get round him not to put that smelly stuff on his hair. Must leave an awful mark on the pillow, too. He had hurt her and she hadn't liked it really, only it was different from anything else, and she'd like to—well, she might let him again if he wanted to. He ought to give her an engagement ring, anyhow, even if

they didn't fix a day for the wedding just yet. He could afford a really good one. Diamonds and platinum. It wasn't smart to wear gold now.

Nora would jump out of her skin if she knew what had happened. A proper old maid, Nora was. She wouldn't half give Ben a time of it, when they got married. Make an awful lot of fuss. Silly really, when you came to think of it. After all, it was only natural. And nice really, even if it did hurt. They said it only hurt the first time. A bit of fun. Didn't do any harm, so long as you took care. And didn't make yourself cheap. She'd have to be careful with Maurice. He mustn't think he could have what he wanted just when he liked. Put him off once or twice. That would do him good. He was always nicer when she kept him guessing. The best thing would be not to let him get her anywhere alone. And she'd talk to him straight about that engagement ring.

But suppose she never saw him again? She didn't know where he lived. She could go to his office, of course, but he'd only get his rag out then. She'd been once before, in her lunch hour, and he was really rude about it. Besides, that typist of his would give her such a look. He *must* come. Or he must write, anyhow. She wouldn't let any man treat her like dirt just because she'd given him everything. Or was it because of her father and all that in the paper? But Maurice didn't even know it was her father. She'd always pretended she was an orphan. Unless he'd seen that article in the Sunday paper? She ought to have thought of that. That photo of Ma, he'd recognize that. Fifty quid! It was dear at the price, if it meant losing Maurice. Suppose he just dropped her, never bothered about her again? He might. Other fellows had done it to girls whose fathers weren't going to be hanged. Perhaps they

wouldn't hang him, seeing that he was drunk when he did it? There wouldn't be quite the same disgrace then. Maurice might not mind that so much. After all, she hardly knew her father. It wasn't her fault. It had nothing to do with her. Maurice must see that. He would come back all right if she hadn't gone and lain down on that bed and then called him in to her, like a fool. But perhaps he was after another girl already to see what he could get out of her? He wasn't the sort to deny himself much.

4

A double knock sounded on the door. Connie and Nora looked at each other, and then a credulous hope fluttered in Connie's heart. She sprang to open the door.

But it was Ben, Ben in a new suit and a soft hat, who stood there. Nora cried his name.

"Docked at Birkenhead this morning," he explained.

"You haven't lost your job?"

"Not on your life. Sail again next week. Karachi this time."

"I'll make tea," said Nora.

"Well," said Connie, "I guess you two lovebirds won't want me. Anyhow, I'm tired, so I'll try a spot of shut-eye."

Ben made an apologetic gesture of protest.

"Good night, Ben," Connie replied, ignoring it. "I'm ever so glad about the ship. See you again before you sail?"

"You bet."

Upstairs, as she turned the lever of the gas bracket and struck a match, which she preserved to light her bedside candle also, Connie told herself fiercely that she was becoming a regular cry-baby.

" No," said Ben, two hours later. " The sooner we get married the better. I know this doesn't seem the proper time, but we've waited too long as it is. And it looks as though I'm going to be away on long voyages."

He persisted, and it was not only because he wanted her, because they had wasted too many years. He had to cover up the secret he would never tell her now; he had to make up for the time he had failed her. He had known, with almost complete certainty, before she had known it, that her father was a murderer. He had hidden himself away from that knowledge, he had written her a note and left her to face disaster alone, because he wanted to take the long delayed opportunity. True, he could never marry her if he did not find a ship. True, if he had remained, there was nothing precise, practical, he could do to help her. But he felt himself traitorous. He knew he had *wanted* to sail away out of the muddle of tears and arguments and lamentation he could see overtaking Nora and her family. Now he could not even confess it, but his impulse was all to redress the balance he had weighed against himself.

He would marry her at once, not later on when all was forgotten, when they had money and when wisdom would approve, but now while she was still shadowed by the disgrace of a father awaiting judgment and death. He was all the more determined because, guiltily, he knew that he hated and resented this embroilment. The whole ship's company had talked about the murder all the way to Lisbon and back. The officers had cursed Peter McCabe at every meal. Henderson had dissected the man's character in detail. And Ben had never been able to open his lips and say that he was the lover of Peter McCabe's daughter. He dare not say it. His

job was not yet secure. And if it became known that he had got that job because his future father-in-law had cut the old Chief's throat! It was an incredible, intolerable situation. He lived lies and reservations, and moved uneasily under their load. He waited on time and longed for new events to obliterate his shipmates' ever-ready memories and criticisms. Secretly there had been a desire in him, all that voyage home, a whispering, insinuating desire, to cut away, to avoid trouble even at the cost of losing all that was dear to him, Nora's fidelity and love. He had spat at that desire and trampled on it, but it lived on in his mind, writhing and poisonous, to humiliate and perplex him.

Because he was guilt-stricken for the past, because he was ashamed of the temptation still coiling and hissing in his secret thoughts, he had driven himself on to the first ferry-boat from Birkenhead and feverishly hastened out to see Nora. Now that she was here beside him, her hand in his, the remembered look and shape and movements of her vivid on his eyes and warm in his heart, he drove his resolution at her in urgent reiterations. He must have his way this time, in order to patch at least one corner of his shattered self-respect.

"We must, we simply must!" he repeated.

Just fancy, thought Nora, Ben wanting her like that all this time, and she had never guessed.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CELL

I

" He's very quiet," said the young warder.

" They mostly are—afterwards. It's a funny thing, I've had charge of all sorts, thieves and frauds and receivers and poisoners, but it's never the ones who've been copped for murder with violence that give the most trouble. Not by a long way. Of course, them as gets certified insane is another matter. I believe it's an awful job in one o' them criminal asylums. But the real toughs, generally speaking, don't commit murder. They knows too much for that. Even when they carry a gun they don't shoot to kill. Too fond of their own precious skins. If you lay aside the poison wallahs—they're a nasty lot now!—murderers don't make too bad prisoners. They lost their heads, that's what happened to them. And ever after they must go brooding over it. I've seen 'em sitting there by the hour, thinking it over, over and over again. Make you almost sorry for 'em, it would."

" I suppose he'll get the rope? "

" Perhaps," said the older man, judicially, " perhaps not. They don't hang the way they used to. And it seems as if he was drunk. He hasn't got a smell of getting away with it, of course. Three witnesses and the razor in his hand. He didn't even try to beggar off. That might count in his favour. You never know what way a judge'll take it. Strictly speaking, according to the law, it's no argument that a man was mad drunk at the time and didn't know what he was doing. The jury's bound to return a verdict of Guilty. And that means the black

cap. But there's a fair chance the sentence might be commuted."

" A lifer ? "

" Yes. Don't know if I was him I wouldn't rather have my neck broke and done with it. Not that you can trust hangmen these days. I saw a hanging once. And the bloke didn't make a good job of it at all."

" What d'ye mean exactly ? " The young warder's face was eager and sharp and rather sick with curiosity. " Didn't the poor devil die quick ? "

" He did not. You know the rope's supposed to snap the spine ? That's the theory. Well, this chap I saw, I'll swear he died of choking. He was all trussed-up of course, but the way the body kept twisting and twitching on the end o' that rope ! It seemed to go on and on, and the doctor got all restless and white, standing there on the edge of the trap and watching it. The Governor didn't half curse the hangman, I can tell you."

" Was he dead ? "

" Oh, yes, he was dead enough when they took him down. But I wouldn't like to say he died of shock, the way he was supposed to. I'd put my money on suffocation. He died hard if anybody ever did."

" They ought to have give that hangman a dose of cells," exclaimed the young warder.

" Well, I don't know. It's my belief it's all a matter of chance, this hanging. Sometimes the theory works, sometimes it don't. No one knows why."

" They oughtn't to have paid his fee, anyway."

" Why not ? It was worse for him than for anyone."

" Except the chap on the end of the rope."

" Yes, except the chap on the end of the rope, of course. That's a good one."

" I hope I never get the job of standing by at a hanging."

" You won't. Not for years anyhow." The older warder spoke with patronizing kindliness. " They don't let any young chaps in the execution shed. Only long service men, and mostly old soldiers at that, who've seen a bit of slaughter in their time."

" It seems a pity we can't do without hanging altogether. There's a lot of people don't hold with it at all."

" Now you're talking soft. This McCabe we've got, I admit he's not so bad. But haven't I told you, as like as not he'll dodge the rope? It always seems a bit hard when you get to know a chap, the way you do in a jail. You grow to like him quite a bit, often enough. But what you got to remember is, it isn't the man that's being punished, it's the crime. Every-one that's hanged for murder puts a dozen others off trying the same game. We're simply doing our duty and affording due protection to Society. You've been told that before. Anyhow, this man's not been tried yet. And by the way, his missus is due this morning to see him. It's come through on the schedule. If I'm not here, make sure she's got her order, and give her thirty minutes, no longer. Thirty minutes, that's the regulation. As like as not they'll be glad to have you come and turn her out. They get on each other's nerves, some on 'em, and others don't know what to say. Sit there making each other miserable, and dumb as a couple of wooden posts. So don't forget, thirty minutes is the time."

" I wonder his missus hasn't been to see him before? "

" That's none of our business."

2

All this stone and cement, and iron doors everywhere, it made you feel cold at once. Such a lot of corridors, too, and when you went up the stairs, there was

wire netting stretched across the well. So that no one could jump down and hurt himself. George Alexander *would* know that. Still, it wasn't a very nice thing to say out loud, considering everything.

" This isn't the prison where we're going to, ma'am," said the warder. " Not properly speaking. It is just where the accused awaiting trial are detained. You'll find your husband quite comfortable. He'll be wearing his ordinary clothes, too."

" Not really ? Well, that's something, isn't it ? "

Quite a civil-spoken chap, and young, too, for his job.

" Here we are, ma'am. I'll come and knock when the time's up."

" Now, George Alexander, I don't think you'd better come in yet. I've got to explain a few things to your father. You can wait outside till we're ready for you. That'll be all right, won't it ? "

" Why, yes, ma'am He can wait with me at the end of the corridor. Perh: ps I ought to tell you, you may see me looking in now and again through this little window in the door. You mustn't mind that. I got to do it. Part o' the routine. Doesn't mean anything."

She was nervous, impatient to see her husband again, yet frightened. " Yes, yes. I understand."

He turned the great key in the lock and opened the door. She heard him fasten it again behind her.

Peter was sitting there, staring at her, and in the ill-lighted cell his head looked enormous, a great, round, heavy mass too big and too heavy for his shoulders, which bent and sloped forward as he sat at the wooden table, his elbows crooked in front of him and the weight of his broad despondent jaws poised on his two fists propped under his throat. His eyes had faded, she noticed at once ; the colour was drained out of them ;

they peered at her under the bushed eyebrows with a dull, indifferent stare.

" Hello," he said.

She faltered, her voice catching in her throat and piping there on shrill, harsh notes. " I had to come, Peter. I just had to."

" That's all right, old girl. Don't you upset yourself about me. I'm not worth it." And then the dark mask of his face lightened into mockery, into the familiar, half-intentional, half-playful jeer she knew so well. " I suppose that's what everyone's tellin' you now, eh ? "

" I don't let people talk to me about you, Peter."

" I see. Ashamed of me ? Well, I don't blame you, lass. Here. You better sit down."

He rose, sat on the iron bedstead, and left the chair vacant for her.

" This seems an awful cold sort of place, Peter. Have you got plenty of good warm underwear ? "

" Sure I have," he answered listlessly.

" I could do your washing for you."

" No need. They took away my clothes before they was properly dirty and fetched me clean things. They're cracked over washing. I'm not doing any work and my things don't get dirty in a week. But do you think they'll listen to me ! "

" Is the food good ? "

" Better'n any ship I ever was on, though that's not sayin' much."

" Plenty of it ? I could bring you pies and cakes. You used to like my pies."

" I get more than I can eat. You see, they're fattenin' me up for the slaughter-house."

Against all her good resolutions, she began to weep. " You mustn't talk like that. You mustn't ! I can't bear it."

" All right, I won't. It's this waitin,' and waitin', and nothing to do, I can't stand. Putting me off my sleep, it is. Jeez, think of me not being able to sleep ! Sufferin' from nerves like a white-faced clurk."

" Oh, Peter, how could you do a thing like that ! "

" Like what ? " He looked at her sulkily. " Oh, I see. I was drunk. I keep on telling 'em that. I don't remember anything about it, after I'd seen the poor swine down on the Dock Road. I meant to give him something to remember me by, but God help me, I never meant to do him in. No one could 'a been more surprised than me afterwards."

" It all seems so queer," murmured Mrs. McCabe, watching him with shy, lidded eyes across the table. " Everything's happened so sudden. You coming home after all that time, without a word. And then going off and doing that. Somehow, I can't believe it was you, Peter, not even if you was drunk. It all feels like a dream."

" What do they think, people outside ? Tell me. You must hear 'em talkin' about it. Do they think I'm going to be hanged ? Or will the judge reckon I was drunk and incapable ? Will I get off with a stretch ? I can't make anything out, shut up in here. They sent a solicitor chap in to see me, and he says I got to plead Not Guilty, 'cause I don't remember anything about it. He's sure I won't get the rope. That's what he says, anyways. But maybe, he's just trying to cheer me up. What do people outside say about it ? "

" I don't know, Peter. Nobody ever talks to me. They wouldn't think it right to."

" I s'pose not. No, they wouldn't. But that looks as if they thought . . . ? Oh, Christ, I wish the blasted Assizes would come and then I'd know one way or another."

" Mrs. Morris did say a man she knows, who's a clurk in a lawyer's office, told her he thought you'd be all right."

" Did he now? A chap like that ought to know. Who's this Mrs. Morris, though? I never heard of her."

" She lives in our house. No, you wouldn't know her. But you know Mrs. Gibson, don't you? "

" Gibson? No, never heard of her."

" Well, she says different, but then she's no better than she ought to be. She lives on the next floor down. She was trying to tell our Nora something about you having been with her that night, you know, after you left us. She always was a liar. I told Nora I didn't believe a word of what she said."

" Do you mean a woman with a lot of fair hair? Good-looking, but a bit untidy? "

" So you was there, Peter? "

" Yes. She asked me in for a drink. Whisky. We had a few glasses together in her sitting-room. She can put it away all right. You're not trying to tell me she's letting on her and me had a go together? 'Cause if that's what she says, she's a bloody liar, and you can tell her that from me. Oh, yes, she'd 'a liked it all right. You bet your life, she would. I could see that. I wasn't so drunk then I hadn't got her weighed-up. I choked her off good and proper. We had a row about it. She started to make nasty remarks about you, and I wasn't taking it from her. I called you some hard names, in my time, but I don't let anyone else. I'm not that sort of chap. Never was and never will be."

" She always was a disgrace to the whole street," declared Mrs. McCabe, her thin face suddenly radiant.

" But look here," her husband continued. " There's

one thing she told me, and if it's true, I've got it in for you, so help me I have. She said we've got a son."

" Yes, that's true, Peter."

" Why didn't you tell me? All these years and you never let on."

" I never knew where to write to. You can't blame me for that."

" But before I went away. You must 'a known there was a baby coming? "

" I wasn't sure then."

" Well, why didn't you say something that night? You never opened your lips except to blackguard me. And Nora the same. Was you laughing at me all the time? Me sitting there without knowing I had a son in the world."

" No, it wasn't that. I was so taken aback. You did give me a shock, coming home so sudden, you know."

" Perhaps I did. Where was he that night? I went up to the bedrooms afterwards, but there wasn't a sign of him. I been thinking it over since I been locked up and I made it out that bitch of a woman was just having me on. Where had the kid got to? "

With her secret glowing warm within her breast, Mrs. McCabe answered, " He was staying with one of his school friends for the night."

" School friends? Then it's true. He did win a scholarship to one of them colleges? Got brains, eh? Takes after his old man, I'll bet."

" Well, he *is* a bit like you. Not so much as when he was born."

" What have you called him? Peter? "

" No. George Alexander."

For the first time the man in the serge suit burst into laughter. It rocked his big, sombre head. Even when the shutter on the slit-window in the door was with-

drawn and the warder's puzzled eyes appeared there, Peter McCabe did not stop laughing. He waved the warder away with a wide sweep of his arm.

" All right, m'lad. Nothing to worry about. Just been getting a bit of good news from my old woman, that's all. George Alexander ! You always was a bit sweet on him, wasn't you ? Fancy me having a lad named George Alexander ! Scholarship winner, too ! Jeez, I can't get over it. How old will he be ? Fourteen ? "

" Nearly. His birthday's on the third o' March."

" I wish I could set eyes on him. Just once and I'd be satisfied."

" You can if you like." Mrs. McCabe spoke triumphantly, as calmly as she could, but pride and gratification at the success of her stratagem shone in her face. " I brought him along with me. He's waiting in the corridor now."

The squat burly man leapt from the bed where he sat and ran to beat impatient tattoos on the door.

" You got a bell here. Have you forgotten ? "

She smiled as she shook the wooden handle of the little bell on the table and, under its agitations tinkling so gaily through the sombre cell, she could almost hear her own thoughts, marvelling fondly that her husband was still such a child in his ways.

3

" Well, lad, you know who I am, don't you ? Let's have a good look at you. Here, where the light comes in. Ay, you've got the McCabe in you all right. But then you've got the look of your Ma as well. You'll do. You'll not make a mess of your life, like me. Mind you, I never had your chances Sit you down. Never mind me. I've got all day and all night now to rest me

if I want to. So you're my son? Seems funny we don't know each other. But there it is. My fault, all my fault. Your Ma'll tell you that. I dare say she has already."

"Indeed, I haven't, have I, George Alexander?"

"No, Mother."

"The boy feels a bit strange, you know, Peter. It isn't easy for him."

"I know, I know. I've disgraced you, son. I'm not making any bones about it. But never you mind. You'll be able to go away and forget all about me. Doesn't matter what happens to me now. At the best I'm going to get twenty years or else—but you take no account o' me. I never was any good to you. Never should 'a been either, even if this hadn't happened. I'm nothing to be proud on. Proud of, I should say, now I'm talkin' to a scholar. But I'm proud of *you*, son. You're going to please your Ma, aren't you, and make up for what I done to her? That's right! I always wanted a son. Not that I wasn't fond of Nora and Connie when they was kids. Only I wanted a lad of my own as well. And now here I've got one, half grown-up as you might say. Long trousers already. Here, son, here's a quid note for you. Go on. I used to reckon myself lucky to get a Saturday penny when I was your age. No, I didn't though. I was earnin' my own living by then. There's no need for you to do that. You'll earn plenty later on, and you won't have to go to sea, same as I did. I'm glad of that. It's a dog's life. Never did me any good. Go on, put it in your pocket. Your old man's never been able to give you anything till now."

"It's far too much," Mrs. McCabe protested. "He's only a boy. Besides, you keep your money."

"Let me have my way this once. Anyhow, what good's money to me here? While I'm about it, you'd

better take the rest, Mary. All the notes anyways. I'll keep the change for baccy. They took it off me soon's they got me into the police station, but I asked for it to-day, when I heard you was coming. There's the best part of my wages from the last trip there. It's not often you've had that since we were married, is it, old girl? Put it away, sonny. It'll be about the only reason you'll have to think of me kindly. You look fine. I only wish I could see you in your college cap. To think of my son going about in one of them coloured affairs and his books in a bag over his shoulder. I'd just about bust myself with pride."

"He's got his school cap there in his pocket. Let your father see it, George Alexander."

Respectfully the stubby, browned fingers took the piece of purple and green quartered felt from the schoolboy's diffident hands.

"My word, that's smart, that is! Gold badge an' all. What's this it says on it?"

"*Experientia docet*," said George Alexander, regaining a little confidence.

"French, eh? And I s'pose you know what it means?"

"It's Latin. It means: Experience teaches."

"Does it now? Experience teaches! Well, that's true enough. So you know Latin, do you? Look here, my son, I haven't been much good to you. But I'm down and out, see. Would you like to do me a favour?"

"If I can," said the boy, uncomfortably expectant.

"I'd just give anything in the world to hear you recite a piece in Latin. I know I'm ignorant and I shan't understand a word, but if I could just say to myself afterwards, well, I've seen my lad and I've heard him talk Latin, I should feel somehow I wasn't altogether a good-for-nothing. Will you, son?"

The boy's thoughts raced in panic : the fleeting track of them could be seen crossing his anxious face. " You can't talk Latin much," he attempted to explain. " It's not like French. It's meant to be written and read."

" Yes, but *you* can do it. Just for a minute ? "

" I'll try."

" That's the boy. Here, put your college cap on while you talk. Stand over there, where I can see you. You look just fine. Now, off you go."

Trembling with shame and diffidence, the boy began on what he could remember of a few lines from the Æneid, " *Arma Virumque cano*," stumbling over quantities and muddling the rhythms, but conscious always of his father's broad, admiring face upturned to his, and his mother smiling to herself, the pair of them abstracted and ludicrous with pride.

He stopped the second he heard the warder's slow, deliberate knock on the door.

" I think the man wants us to go."

" All right, you go along first, George Alexander. I want a word with your father."

" Yes, Ma."

" Will you shake hands with me, son ? You don't mind."

The boy was too bewildered to answer, but he put out his thin white hand and was startled by the strength of his father's convulsive grip.

" You're a good lad to come here and see me. Now you best go away and forget you ever had an old man. Good luck, son. God bless you."

The boy shambled out somehow through the door which the warder held open for him.

Out in the corridor, the grey daylight was brighter ;

it made his eyes dazzle. The warder looked carefully away from him, so he walked across to the barred window and stared down into the great stone yard where two men in ill-fitting grey uniforms were sweeping the wet concrete with long-handled brooms.

The warder knocked carefully again on the door which he held ajar. When he peeped through the barred aperture he saw the woman holding the man's head tight to her breast, while she stared at the door with wide eyes which, he knew, saw nothing.

Again and again the warder knocked, so hard that his knuckles ached. Then he threw the door wide open.

" I'm sorry, madam," he said.

CHAPTER XV

DEPARTURE

I

It was different, unusual, utterly out of routine, this awakening, but some time passed before she realized that she was not alone in the bed. First, she missed the accustomed penetration of light from the window: the whole estuary ought to be there, wide and open, and a tall sky of starlight filling the room with a silver glow. This room was too dark; she could not make out the location of walls and dressing-table, and the bed was too wide and too warm. Suddenly she realized that Ben was asleep beside her, and, with a startling influx, memory filled her mind again. Joyfully, fearfully, tenderly, she raised herself on one elbow on the pillow, and strained her eyes to look at him. She could feel his body, big and powerful even in repose, a few inches away, and against the white glimmer of the pillow she thought she could trace the form of his head, the fair hair sticking up untidily at the back and his nose and mouth nuzzling into the blankets. He was her husband now.

She remembered he had hung his watch by the chain, from the rail at the head of the bed. Although she had been so scared last night, she had noticed that and rejoiced over it. It stood for something: it had a meaning: it was a symbol of her new life, like the wooden-backed brushes he had laid on the dressing-table and the striped flannel pyjamas he had put out on the bed. Carefully she reached up now and at last her fingers found the watch. She turned the dial down to-

wards her. The luminous fingers showed ten minutes to six. She bent down again to Ben and kissed him lightly on the forehead, and whispered, " I'm going to get up first. You lie there for a bit." But his arms came round her, and he was warm and urgent against her. The strength of his arms was almost unbearably sweet and comforting.

" Now we *must* get up ! " she said slipping away from him. She turned back the bedclothes and felt for her new bedroom slippers, Connie's present for their honeymoon. If you could call one night a honeymoon !

" Switch on the light," Ben called sleepily.

" When I'm dressed."

The air in that little lofty hotel room was edged with iciness, it thrust at her, pinched her feet, her arms and fingers. She shivered uncontrollably as she pulled on her underclothing beneath her nightdress and then, discarding that, pulled up the shoulder straps. It wouldn't matter very much if Ben saw her in a petticoat, so she groped her way to the door and pressed the switch down. In the dazzle of white light, she saw him sitting up in bed, rubbing his eyes. The flannel jacket of his pyjamas was two buttons loose at the neck, and, with a guilty fascination, she saw the pale skin, so much paler than his face, and the muscular jut of his chest. His hair was tousled and his face looked strange, younger, plumper in its sleepiness.

" My, you could do with a shave," she said.

" Is it awful ? "

" Pretty bad. I suppose I shall have to get used to it." Her laugh held a challenging ring she had not intended.

He answered her laugh with another, and jumped out of bed and came over to her in his pyjamas, and held her again and kissed her twice.

"There, that's enough. I'm going to wash. You'd better hurry yourself."

She turned her back on him, poured water out of the big earthenware jug into the basin, and bent over it. She prolonged her washing, so that he need not feel shy while he dressed. As she dabbed the face-cloth, wrung out in ice-cold water, over her face, she thought exultantly, "I'm married! I know!" She trembled with a strange exhilaration, and then, astonishingly, for a second she thought of Connie. She would take care to be specially nice to Connie from now on.

2

The night porter let them gloomily out and they walked along wet pavements gleaming under the street lamps. Lime Street was empty. A wind blustered across St. George's Plateau and met them with a howling frostiness as they turned north. Ben insisted on stopping at an early coffee stall, and they had just time to gulp once or twice from the big chipped mugs before the tram came along, rattling and screeching and plunging through the deserted darkness, its lamps and window panes shimmering a bright gold as it hurtled over the pale grey rails.

It seemed a long time they were walking along the Dock Road, and the wind grew colder; it dashed stinging pellets of rain into their faces, and whistled and moaned round the corrugated iron roofs.

"I shouldn't have let you come," said Ben.

"You couldn't have kept me away. Think I'd let you go off alone?" She smiled up at him, though her cheeks felt tight and stiff on the bones. Under her coat, however, her body was still warm and glowing, for Ben strode swiftly. His face was frowning with anxiety. "They won't miss the tide, waiting for me," he ex-

plained. " The Old Man's been fine, letting me join so late. But they won't miss the tide."

However, when the policeman opened the iron gates to them, there was the *Benediction* still at the dockside, and one gangway still sloping down from the well-deck. The wind was ruffling the water even inside the dock, and the rusty, iron-plated hull, as they hurried past, swung slowly up and down. A man was standing beside a rope wound about a rusted bollard, ready to cast off. He looked at them with impatient, curious eyes. The Captain on the bridge high above gave them a glance, touched the peak of his cap. In the lantern light up there they could see the momentary gleam of his teeth as he smiled. " That's for you," Ben explained.

At the foot of the gangway, " It's got to be a quick good-bye," he said.

" Yes. I know."

She came shyly close to him. She could feel the strength and urgency and warmth of his body through the thickness of his overcoat. His kisses hurt her, bruised her lips, but when for a second they softened, she responded with an ardency which made her close her eyes. Then Ben pulled himself away, although his hands still clung to her arms before he turned and ran up the gangway. Her thoughts hammered chaotically in her forehead, in her breast, a furious lamentation, a despairing protest, but she stood there and waited till he came into the light of an open alleyway. She watched for his waving hand, and waved back to him.

From the ship, lofted above her, a man's voice shouted an order, and another man answered. The ropes were cast off, and trailed in the water as the screw revolved noisily. Slowly, almost dreamily, the ship slid away from the wharfside, and slowly nosed forward to the dock gates, her lights spilling pools of wavering radiance on

the ruffled water. She watched it ease through the narrow portal and out into the open river, and then, blaming herself for stupidity, hurried along till she stood near the dockhead. She knew that Ben had gone below to change : he was to go on watch right away. He'd told her that. He would expect her to turn away and hurry home. But she could not. Months would have to pass before she saw him again. She would have his letters but not the nearness of him, the reality, the warmth and the strength, the comfort of his arms.

Day was breaking now across the wide estuary. The upper spread of the sky was faintly luminous, charged with a silver pallor, and westward, under the oncoming day, the outflung hills of Wales were taking shape, detaching themselves in purple undulant masses from the dimensionless darkness. Chilled and stiffened by the wind, she stood watching the ship recede, till it was only one of many distant hulls scattered across the wide horizon of grey water where the estuary gave place to the open sea.

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About this book

WATERFRONT, the novel with which John Brophy made his name, is set in the great seaport of Liverpool. Almost among the docks and warehouses which line the Mersey estuary live Mrs. McCabe, her two daughters (who turn out every weekday morning to work in a big store), and her schoolboy son. Her husband—a hard-drinking, irresponsible seafarer who has deserted his family for fourteen years—suddenly returns. He finds Nora being courted by an out-of-work ship's engineer, and Connie, his younger daughter, 'having a good time' with a young man whose intentions are hardly honourable. The consequence of Peter McCabe's unexpected reappearance are dramatic. A murder occurs, plunging the family into grief and bewilderment, and leading to a final scene of impressive power. This edition of the novel, specially revised by the author, is issued to coincide with the British film based on it, made at Pinewood Studios and 'on location' in Liverpool, with Robert Newton, Kathleen Harrison, Susan Shaw, and, playing Nora and Ben, Avis Scott and Richard Burton (who are shown in the scene reproduced on the front cover)—a Paul Soskin production.

John Brophy, born in Liverpool, ran away from school and enlisted in the Army before he was fifteen, served overseas in the first World War, and was an advertising copywriter and publicity manager to a big store before devoting all his time to authorship. Among his most recent novels are *Gentleman of Stratford*, *Sarah*, *Julian's Way* and *Immortal Sergeant*, while his books of non-fiction include *The Human Face*, *Body and Soul* and *The Mind's Eye*.

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